

# SCRUTINIES

VOLUME II

By VARIOUS WRITERS

Collected by  
EDGELL RICKWORD

LONDON  
WISHART & COMPANY  
1931

Printed in Great Britain by NEILL & Co., LTD., EDINBURGH.

*Copyright, 1931.*



## FOREWORD

THIS set of Scrutinies differs from the first in at least one rather noticeable way—the writers criticised are not national figures in the sense that Wells, Shaw, Kipling, and the others were, each expressing the “conscience” of some numerically important group. And as these reputations are not sacrosanct, as they have not been hallowed by long years of habitual praise, this volume will perhaps be found to be less astringent, to have less about it of that “chill as of some haunt of dissenters” which a perspicacious critic observed in the last. As these writers have not been rigged into an orthodoxy, as opinion has not hardened into dogma, dissent is not present in quite that crude ungraciousness for which it has always been ridiculed by the comfortable incumbents of the literary Establishment.

So the necessity for a revaluation hardly enters into the intention of this volume as it did into the intention of the other. This is an attempt to see the subjects in rather longer perspective than it is possible for a reviewer, poor galley-slave, to do: and nothing in the nature of a *putsch* is

## SCRUTINIES II

intended, no attempt to impose a judgment, though that apparently is the way any attempt at free discussion of literary values is visualised, so inconceivable is it to some minds that there may be a disinterested pleasure to be gained from that kind of activity. It would be ridiculous to dogmatise, since literary judgment is the most complicated thing in the world, involving as it does all the other judgments from the æsthetic to the moral; but the most useful criticism is bound to be biased, because the critic's personal reactions are the only sound basis he has to work on. That is why there should be an immense amount of discussion of these matters, not in order to arrive at the truth, which it would be difficult to define in this relation, but to combat the natural tendency to acquiesce in a quasi-truth, to acquiesce in anything rather than continue in this uncomfortable condition of mental activity. So it is much easier to say, "These people want to force me to think the opposite of what I think at present," and so to react in some variety of indignation. That was what happened with two journals over the previous volume. The *Spectator* burst into an angry screech and the Literary Supplement to the *Times* administered a dignified rebuke of our low "standard of literary courtesy." To a paralytic, I suppose, any man who walks with ordinary freedom must seem to be executing a violent and gratuitously offensive gesture.

This list might have been composed of more popular  
vi

## FOREWORD

writers, but with one or two exceptions there are no writers now who combine a really large following with intellectual eminence in the way the Edwardians did. To express it very roughly, I should say that the talented writer of to-day inclines to a more intensive study of the individual, whereas much of the literature of the Edwardians consisted in an extensive study of the reactions of not very strongly individualised units to changing social forms. Social re-organisation in a multitude of forms was a passion common to most of the reading class before the War, and dictated their preferences in literature. Naturally, with the evaporation of that common emotion and in the absence of anything equally widely distributed to take its place, taste disintegrates, and the only common point of interest must be the individual. At the same time more energy is released for the consideration of technical problems, and a good deal of the work considered in this volume is, as a consequence, experimental.

Two years ago I said that in the absence of much periodical literature of any account it might be expected that there would be a place for occasional volumes such as these. Nothing has happened since to require that statement to be modified. In fact, after the publication of Mr I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* it seems to be more than ever essential that the circulation of ideas should be speeded up, for I can but think that the present stagnation

## SCRUTINIES II

and poverty of means of discussion is partly responsible for the deplorably perverse or meaningless reactions exhibited by the reputedly intelligent readers on whom Mr Richards worked his experiment.

E. R.

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE LYRIC IMPULSE IN THE POETRY OF T. S. ELIOT, by <i>Alec Brown</i>	I
2. THE CRITICAL METHOD OF T. S. ELIOT, by <i>Bertram Higgins</i>	53
3. ALDOUS HUXLEY, by <i>Mary Butts</i>	73
4. JAMES JOYCE, by <i>Jack Lindsay</i>	99
5. THE LATER PERIOD OF D. H. LAWRENCE, by <i>Peter Quennell</i>	123
6. WYNDHAM LEWIS, by <i>Edgell Rickword</i>	139
7. THE THREE SITWELLS, by <i>Sherard Vines</i>	163
8. LYTTON STRACHEY, by <i>Christopher Saltmarshe</i>	183
9. VIRGINIA WOOLF, by <i>William Empson</i>	203
10. REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW OF THE RELATION OF POETRY TO SOCIETY, by <i>Gilbert Armitage</i>	217
11. NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL, by <i>Brian Penton</i>	235
12. THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT, by <i>Montagu Slater</i>	263
13. CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, by <i>Constant Lambert</i>	289
	ix



One

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE IN THE POETRY OF T. S. ELIOT

*by*

ALEC BROWN

FROM the very commencement of his work, it seems, Mr Eliot has been almost morbidly attracted by the sordid paraphernalia of city life.

*“The winter evening settled down  
With smells of steaks in passageways.  
Six o’clock.  
The burnt-out ends of smoky days. . . .”*

His work is full of the burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
In an early prelude there is a lady to whom he says :

*“You curled the papers from your hair,  
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet  
In the palms of both soiled hands.”*

## SCRUTINIES II

Fully ten years later we still find avatars of that lady in those who wash their feet in soda-water, or have

“ . . . out of the window perilously spread ”  
their

“ . . . drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays.”

There has, of course, in the ten years been a change in them; but they none the less remain little votary figures, a trifle sordid, tossed by their offerer to the feet of a divinity we may conveniently call Goddess Dfab with the studied nonchalance of the somewhat self-conscious would-be adept in the cult.

But religion is a curious growth: the Goddess to whom Mrs Porter is offered has already become, we observe, a composite deity; and is still in process of being transfigured, by overwhelming accretions (though unbeknown to her worshippers), from the simple conception of fanatic youth to something more mature, quite different (polytheistic in the guise of monotheistic), truly rich and strange. She is no longer a crude, mono deity, in whose world morning may come simply

“to consciousness of faint stale smells of beer from the sawdust-trampled street,”

or in

“one-night cheap hotels, and sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.”



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

That earlier monotheistic world—the world of Mr Eliot as crystallised out in the volume, *Prufrock*, and published in 1917—is the world of someone who is still mainly pre-occupied with smartly defining life in its meanest terms; with finding a least common multiple into which no fragment of romantic grandeur nor any trace of enthusiasm shall be allowed to creep. It is, of course, partly his being fresh from early absorption in French poetry, the more obviously crystalline virtues of which quite naturally appealed very much to him;<sup>1</sup> but at the same time it is a symptom of one of the ultimate constituents of his view of the world. In this he reminds one how, oneself, when one first learned of the existence of rows even of slums, squalid tenement blocks in Roman towns, or that many an ancient Greek, swarthy as his present descendant, wore coarse homespun or ill-cured and ill-odorous sheepskin and not more gracious robes against the cold winter wind, and was a clumsy fellow, one was at first inclined in first disillusionment to forget that cultured leisured Romans did none the less exist, that there were Greeks who, for all their homespun and sheepskin, spoke a rich language and cultivated an admirable

<sup>1</sup> His published French verse appears later; but here let us note the ear then so attuned to French idiom that, for purposes of rhythm and rhyme, it justified to itself that curious line in *Prufrock*:

“ They will say: ‘ But how his arms and legs are thin! ’ ”

or

“ . . . how can I make a cowardly amends . . . ”

## SCRUTINIES II

drama. The common fact is that, when one is disillusioned in any popular pretty-pretty notion, one is driven at first to blinding oneself to all but the drab reverse. Thus, too, Mr Eliot; and this excusable reaction might well be the complete, not merely the part, explanation of those pages of either free or at least loosely bound verse, with their "*grimy scraps of withered leaves*," their "*damp souls of house-maids*," and—though these do, in almost a Shelley summer breeze, "*sway in the wind like a field of ripe corn*"—with the "*readers of the Boston Evening Transcript*."

But this reaction in disillusionment (together with the young poet's smartness, preciosity, or experiment) will not completely explain the *Prufrock* section of the poems. The preoccupation with mean detail partly results from something quite different. We all have, in our earliest work, the shadow of our developed selves; and of these thirty-two pages nearly half foreshadow, however faintly, the more profound cares of *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*; and here and there within them, just as here and there in the most impersonal early poems<sup>1</sup> with tricks of expression, we have flashes of that awakening awareness of certain aspects of human culture which, by freezing Mr Eliot in desperate despair at the moment which has so far been that of his greatest power, produced, by the clash of his reasoning despair and his inner impulse, his best work;

<sup>1</sup> Impersonal in regard to manner.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

and then sent him forth, still unsatisfied, on a longer quest for something he has not yet found.<sup>1</sup>

Side by side with:

*"As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill"*

(in the epithet style of which Mr Eliot's country of origin is so clearly revealed), and side by side with the chic trifling of:

*"Miss Helen Slingsby was my maiden aunt,  
And lived in a small house near a fashionable square . . ."*

we have, in *Portrait of a Lady*, that sudden self-confession:

*"I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark  
Suddenly, his expression in a glass.  
My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark."*

Does not this recall the paralysis of a mouse before a cat, a rabbit before a snake; or even suggest—he supplies the words himself:

*" . . . when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall . . ."*

—the helpless specimen of the naturalist.

<sup>1</sup> We cannot but admit that his return, bearing that curious trophy of recognising the Anglican Church (an excusable gesture only in one of lesser achievement, mind, and promise than Mr Eliot), is a barren return.

## SCRUTINIES II

Mr Eliot, in the midst of his early trifling, which so easily may appear to some to be nothing more than a very clever young man's desire to *épate* the *bourgeois* (unfortunate butt of this age and regrettable, though tempting, decoy for young writers), thus lets us suddenly see that really he is painfully troubled by his own mortality; and troubled, too, by the uncertainty in which he, as any other man, for all his hideously agile mind's delicacy and range of action, is, not only as to the mere existence of his own achievement, but (granting that achievement exists) to its having any useful organic (indispensable) function in the whole of life in this world. He prefixes Prufrock's miserable chant of trifling, elegant indecision and kidgloved despair with quotations that, more or less clearly, show us his standpoint at this early stage. After the mediaeval Italian he repeats that sentence ending: <sup>1</sup>

*"Quando dismento nostra vanitate  
Trattando l'ombre come cosa salda."*

Then, suddenly,<sup>2</sup> with the next section of his work (*Poems*, 1920, in the *Collected Poems*, which are those published, together with the Prufrock section, in the volume *Ara Vos*

<sup>1</sup> Though let us note that the words mean very different things for the two writers, so that Mr Eliot's quotations are really a quite monstrous perversion of the intended sense of the words.

<sup>2</sup> Suddenly—not perhaps so much because Mr Eliot's development is like that of the seeds Indian tricksters lead us to see germinate and sprout while we wait, as because he, being of a very critical (and self-critical) nature, reveals to us only fully developed fruit.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

*Prec*), we pass to an entirely new stage in his outlook on life. This new section is that principally (for the French verses are but makeweight) of the Sweeney poems and what may perhaps eventually be regarded as Mr Eliot's masterpiece, that nearly lucid, fully dignified poem *Gerontion*, which, in its recognition and acceptance of the curve of life to its summit and then down to death, is a wonderful pendant to Freud's *Totem und Tabu*.

For the moment, while we are tracing the origins of his internal conflict, it will be more profitable to see the development in his outlook which *Gerontion* exhibits, rather than to enter the kaleidoscopic maze of the symbols of Sweeney and the hippopotamus and the Baptized God of the Umbrian School, that in Eliot scintillate upon any other than a sober "gesso ground."

It is painfully difficult for a mind as active as Mr Eliot's, for which all objects gradually become significant, when sifting his material, to leave anything at all in his work. Nearly all things become pertinent. When there is little substance it is easy for its manipulator, the poet, to deal with it; but when the great labour of a poem is not the conception or the writing of it, but the pruning of it, the sifting of it, it would be miraculous if all the material left were essential and organically connected. Thus even *Gerontion*, in all its perfection, lacks at moments internal unity—contains material unwelded, though in marvellously less degree than

## SCRUTINIES II

the much-admired work of many a brainless chirruper of the three preceding centuries. Let us look at *Gerontion*:

“Here I am, an old man in a dry month,  
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.  
I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought . . .”

from the beginning.

“There with a thousand small deliberations  
Protract the profit, of their chilled delirium,  
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,  
With pungent sauces, multiply variety  
In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider<sup>1</sup> do,  
Suspend its operations, will the weevil  
Delay? . . .”

from towards the end.

Once again the subject is the transitoriness of life, the urgent alarm at coming death; but there is a difference between the attitude here and the attitude of Prufrock. Prufrock is stricken with his first alarm at the nearness of his end, and he dissolves hopelessly into a maze of small personal considerations. He is chiefly occupied with his own indecisions,

<sup>1</sup> We may note the author's own reference for this image: In *The Waste Land* there is a note to line 407: cf. Webster, *The White Devil*, V, vi:

“ . . . they'll remarry  
Ere the worm pierce your winding-sheet, ere the spider  
Make a thin curtain for your epitaphs.”

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

and beyond ironic record of the unimportance of his fragile figure his mind does not takè him. Not so Gerontion. With some satisfactory resignation of old age, that his Creator has so nicely, in his own hey-day, divined, Gerontion finds himself man enough to scorn the apparent prolongation of life by exciting the membrane with piquant sauces.

*"I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it,  
Since what is kept must be adulterated?"*

It is a satisfyingly hard consolation (that in this weakened<sup>1</sup> age must to many seem harsh, forbidding) he gives himself; but this new indifference to self is partly to be explained by a new preoccupation. In this lies the great development.

*" . . . Think now  
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities . . .  
Gives too late  
What's not believed in, or if still believed,  
In memory only, reconsidered passion."*

For the moment it is not from the personal point of view that life appears most acutely as a vanity of vanities, but from that of the succession of generations. The main cultural bonds between the generations—religion and art—are con-

<sup>1</sup> Weakened, no doubt, partly by the excess of public security in our country, partly by the under-nutrition of our educated classes. A sign of the times is the tendency for that lesser book, the New Testament, to outshadow the Old Testament, which made England.

## SCRUTINIES II

sidered; in the case of religion with some lack of co-ordination. Alas! Mr Eliot finds it is the Mr Silveros who divide, eat, and drink Christ the tiger; the Mr Silveros who, even before such links with the past from which they are sprung as pictures of previous generations, past them, to and fro, "walked all night in the next room." He himself, who needs not the knowledge, who would be happier without it, knows all about the "cunning passages" of history; whereas the practising Mr Silveros neither know nor care to know. And with what has now become one of the characteristics of Mr Eliot's verse, his use of what I have designated elsewhere *associative form*,<sup>1</sup> he comments, scarcely even with bitterness, but wily. A Dutch master:

". . . *Fräulein von Kulp*  
*Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.*  
*Vacant shuttles . . ."*

But what do the vacant shuttles of the picture?

"*Vacant shuttles*  
*Weave the wind.*"

By a shift of sense born of association we have one of Mr Eliot's main symbols<sup>2</sup> (from *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Gerard Hopkins and Associative Form," *Dublin Magazine*, July-September, 1928.

<sup>2</sup> The symbols used by this fascinating writer, and his employ of them, demand separate treatment.



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

*The Hollow Men*). Fräulein von Kulp, hesitating in the hall (he who putteth his hand to the plough), prevents us from entirely forgetting Mr Hamlet Prufrock; but we remember him only a second—the centre of gravity has changed: “. . . *will the weevil delay?*” Once more the wind answers us, in a metaphor perhaps a little too personally experienced<sup>1</sup> to fit the detached grandeur of the rest of the poem:

“ . . . *Gull against the wind, in the windy straits  
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,  
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims.*”

Then, once more, bound in by pure association, the picture changes. The winds that dash the white wings to the waters and to exhausted death drive an old man “*to a sleepy corner.*” Then, with a sudden brief cadence, the poem ends:

“*Tenants of the house,  
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.*”

Tenants of what house? The house owned by the Jew<sup>2</sup>? Is that the house? Yes; and no! The thoughts of his brain, these flashes of consciousness of the negative side of human life and effort, are as much real members of the household as he and the rest of the house, “*a decayed house.*”

<sup>1</sup> Yet who does not remember having remarked the helpless morsel of flesh and blown feathers that a gull is against the gale?

<sup>2</sup> There seems no reason why we should reflect Mr Eliot's curious vein of anti-semitism, and copy his small *j*.

## SCRUTINIES II

Outside the decayed house, behold the same sordid paraphernalia of life that always preoccupy him:

*"The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.  
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter."*

But why in a dry season? What has the dry season (chance of the weather in many countries of Europe) to do with it? With that, another favourite symbol, we are at the third stage of Mr Eliot's development—*The Waste Land*. There have been hints of that development from the very beginning; but in *The Waste Land* it is all much more worked out and co-ordinated; and Sir James Frazer has claimed another victim. For a time this is to be to our fortune, because the Frazer alarm brought certain of Mr Eliot's perceptions sharply to focus, and strongly inhibited certain impulses. The resulting conflict in Mr Eliot nevertheless for a time brought great results.

There has been, from the very beginning of Mr Eliot's published work, a leaning in him to co-ordinate past and present things representing the same aspect of human life. One does not notice it immediately in the early welter of preciosities such as:

*"When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table . . ."*

but yet one can see first consciousness of what is to

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

come in, say, the *Portrait of a Lady*, in those pointed lines on life:

“ . . . (Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)  
‘ You let it flow from you, you let it flow,  
And youth is cruel, and has no remorse  
And smiles at situations which it cannot see. . . . ’ ”

Let us give a fleeting glance at that interweaving of an emblem of spring (slowly twisting the lilac stalks) while the talk is of death, and then remember that *situations*, for Mr Eliot, connote those cruel, bare elements in life that are common to all ages and all peoples, and which are such a great source of profit to trained gipsies and the like who know how to talk of them—they are the situations we meet in horoscopes and fortune-tellings:

“ Here is *Belladonna*, the *Lady of the Rocks*,  
The lady of situations,”

we shall find Madame Sosostris crying in *The Waste Land*.

There is, then, this sudden premonition in *Portrait of a Lady*. Further, in *Mr Apollinax*, by a step perhaps instinctive, in the midst of *preciosities* of a fashionable kind, a mere comparison of a modern type with a figure of myth takes on the form that such identifications are to have in the later poems. The touch of *couleur locale* is really a touch of local colours—not that of scholarly reconstruction of the period, but that (as we find in a Virgin receiving in a fifteenth-

## SCRUTINIES II

century mansion) of the period of the writer. It will be useful to quote it:

*"When Mr Apollinax visited the United States  
His laughter tinkled among the tea-cups.  
I thought of Fragilion, that sly figure among the birch trees,  
And of Priapus in the shrubbery  
Gaping at the lady in the swing."*

However much one may wish to argue that the lady whom Priapus watched from the bushes may ~~feasibly~~, in antiquity, have been in a swing, does it not remain a fact that the swing picture, by reason perhaps of the word "lady" used, appears to us essentially modern-world, whereas Priapus remains ancient? Priapus looking on a nymph is a *situation*: aged and calculating lust; the habitual gesture of the male. In the same way Mr Apollinax, in his laughter, reveals his natural preoccupation with sex. Mr Eliot is, of course (and this, too, is a part cause of his malaise), abreast with Mr Freud; and not only sees "*the skull beneath the skin*," but also that constant subterranean desire which drives the human male till old age, the time for cudchewing by the *vieux lubrique*, to constant search for instants of *puissance et de délire*.<sup>1</sup>

But this function of his poetry (for it eventually becomes

<sup>1</sup> The "Fire Sermon" is his loftiest treatment of this subject; the Fragment of an Agon" (*Criterion*, January 1927) is another much less profound treatment of the same group of "situations."

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

more than a mere characteristic) results from the very conflict we are to examine, appearing at rare moments in the first group of poems, growing more marked in the second group. Here, although the poems are still mainly (not entirely) concerned with the individual's life, it is one of the two elements (to the other of which I will come later) which turns the mechanical patchwork of the Sweeney series into smooth poems. To venture a suggestion to which I am guided purely by the feel of the poem, I would suggest that the French verse *Lune de Miel* was written earlier than the English poems in the same group; but even if this is not so, it shows characteristics of earlier conception (since usually there is a gap between conception and even first focussing of a poem). There is in it, too, that failure to get so deep in suggestiveness which comes from employing any other than one's first language.<sup>1</sup> There may be, too, an element of the influence of the more obvious forms of preciseness and matter-of-factness of French,<sup>2</sup> but whatever it is, we find

<sup>1</sup> It is in this lies the difficulty of literary work in any but one's first language (generally equivalent to maternal). Long after it has become easy to make our meaning clear (using the language, of course, formally correctly) it remains practically impossible (simply owing to comparative paucity of associations for each word) to suggest a meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Just as (whichever, again, was written first) the lines in *Phlébas le Phénicien*—*Figurez-vous donc, c'était un sort pénible*—become, in *The Waste Land*, in English, so much deeper and suppler, if less matter-of-fact:

“ . . . Gentile or Jew,  
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward. . . ”

## SCRUTINIES II

the (of earlier conception) picture of a couple in bed in *Lune de Miel* given as:

*"A l'aise entre deux draps, chez deux centaines de punaises;  
La sueur aestivale, et une forte odeur de chienne,"*

and then, in English, in *Sweeney Erect*, becoming—

*"Morning stirs the feet and hands  
(Nausicaa and Polypheme),  
Gesture of orang-outang  
Rises from the sheets in steam."*

It must be noticed carefully that the two in bed (personalised in *Lune de Miel* by no more than the one line "*Lui pense aux pourboires, et rédige son bilan*") have not become Nausicaa and Polypheme merely for pretty-pretty purposes. In this connection we must observe that in this poem both the early and the permanent characteristics of Mr Eliot's poetic language are there. We have preciousness, transmuted somewhat by its snappy conciseness, in—

*"This oval O cropped out with teeth,"*

and, further, the insistence on the sordid and commonplace, as—

*"Sweeney addressed full length to shave, ✓  
Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,  
Knows the female temperament,  
And wipes the suds around his face." <sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> In regard to the pretty-pretty element, it seems evident that the names Nausicaa and Polypheme, while not to be regarded merely as pretty-pretty (because the poem contains sordid phrases too), are, to a certain extent, conversely, to be looked on as jam to help us take the bitter, sordid powder.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

Mr Eliot has changed much since his first group of poems. He is now interested in the observation that individuals are the same all the world over, and all the centuries through, in the essentials that preserve the species. In this group of poems dismay on contemplating man's pullulation passes beyond the individual to the whole of mankind for a space in *Gerontion*, and shows out clearly, too, in the inconclusive scraps of philosophising such as those we find scattered<sup>1</sup> through *Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service*.

But, nevertheless, the main concern of the group is with the similarity of individual to individual through the ages, and on that note, before leading us to *The Waste Land*, the section ends. An indeterminate figure (the host of the establishment—he who can arrange things) is present:

*"The host with someone indistinct  
Converses at the door apart,  
The nightingales are singing near  
The Convent of the Sacred Heart.*

*And sang within the bloody wood  
When Agamemnon cried aloud,  
And let their liquid siftings fall  
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud."*

With this we pass with Mr Eliot to his waste land, and see

<sup>1</sup> The God on the impermanent plaster-ground seems to link, in the poet's mind, with the Ravenna church (*vieille usine désaffectée de Dieu*) and the gentleman at Limoges who walked up and down the room, ignoring the pictures.

## SCRUTINIES II

how thoroughly (since he first marked him down in *Gerontion*) Sir James Frazer has his victim in grasp.

I have mentioned how fine a pendant *Gerontion* makes to "Totem und Tabu." Now, with awesome swiftness, Mr Eliot passes from the individual in all-time and all-place to the individual as part of a species, and the individual is viewed against the whole of life. There is the plight of the individual in his species; the plight of the species among all other species; and, base of all religion, life in general upon the background we presume to imagine of that not-life, where Divinity, at the very least, is necessarily postulated.<sup>1</sup> And in the same way that Mr Eliot, with commendable healthiness, found himself able, as *Gerontion*, nobly to scorn to

*"Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,  
With pungent sauces, multiply variety  
In a wilderness of mirrors,"*

now, with quite unnecessary desire for logic, he raises a dignified despair, not about the vaster matter of life in general, but apparently about the death (which he would consider inevitable) of our civilisation. It is in spite of himself that he becomes genuinely enthusiastic and refreshing about this civilisation; though of that later. For the moment one must ask whether it is not too modest or too supercilious a gesture, this of his, in his notes to *The Waste Land*, to speak

<sup>1</sup> If only for indulgence in that peculiar exercise of non-logic of "proving" its non-existence.



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

of "any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble." If the poem is worth any trouble at all, it is of course worth elucidation, by everybody, though of course not by its composer. In any case the matter, even without the light of the remainder of his work, is not so difficult. Mr Eliot's epigraphs are always lucid; he is too keen to allow himself, as so many writers do, to leave a gap between an epigraph (which has often been the crystal precipitating their work) and that work which follows. His epigraphs are of the sort that are added later. Let us but observe how he heads *The Waste Land*:

*"Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in  
ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις;  
respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω."*

And, at the end, the conclusion:

*"Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth,  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the  
Violet air  
Falling towers—  
Jerusalem—Athens—Alexandria—  
Vienna—London—  
Unreal."*

This vision of Western Europe following, as a matter of course (because "history repeats itself"), in the path of the older civilisations reminds us of Mr Spengler's lugubrious

## SCRUTINIES II

mixture of learning, livid patches of ignorance, vision, and blindness in his remarkable *Untergang des Abendlands*, in which, under the pretext of examining history, he praises the Teutonic Faustian age; and because he finds it an episode about to end, and Mediterranean lucidity is alien to him, in many subtle ways attacks all that is matter-of-fact, human, sane in art, whether past or contemporary. And, indeed, when we turn to Mr Eliot's own notes to his poem (which, as often as they are facetious, are curious or illuminating), we find, if not Mr Spengler, at least one of the same school quoted.

"Compare Hermann Hesse," he says, "*in Blick ins Chaos—'Schon ist halb Europa, schon ist zumindest der halbe Osten Europas auf dem Wege zum Chaos, fährt betrunken in heiligem Wahn am Abgrund entlang und singt dazu, singt betrunken und hymnisch wie Dmitri Karamazoff sang. Ueber diese Lieder lacht der Bürger beleidigt, der Heilige und Seher hört si mit Tränen.'*"

This observation, coming out of a comparison that involved Dmitri Karamazoff (which should anyway be enough to make adequacy suspect), is most enlightening. What shall be Mr Eliot's reaction to these songs of the bourgeois? Shall he, observing this vain hilarity in the face of destruction, regard it as a seer, and do what he logically feels he should—weep? Or shall he make himself the small bourgeois too, who at the most is annoyed—and laugh? Supposing that he had been free of an inner impulse either way—to laughter

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

or to tears, to be seer or light singer—what a curious dilemma it would be.

But he was, of course, not free of inner impulse—nobody able to create ever is. He was born with a powerful impulse for what is commonly thought of as song. He was born with a powerful lyric impulse: an impulse for a song of quite a different sort from that which made him, by reason, feel he ought to weep. And at this point it will be convenient to elucidate what I understand by lyric, that it should be both the answer to the kind of suicidal, intoxicated song that amuses the bourgeois and the answer to the tears of the “seer.”

It will be impossible here to go into the matter in any detail, but for the purposes of this paper it will be sufficient if I suggest that lyric manner (whether of verse, prose, or, say, a mathematical theorem) is that quality of it which arises from the direct positive communication it makes to us by utilising our associations, and dispensing with the intervention certainly of any conscious, and probably of all, ratiocination. Now, since our basic preoccupation in life is the maintenance of our kind, anything communicated which, by improving our powers of perception, assists our adjustment to our environment is positive, or, we may well say, fertile. It is those passages in a novel in which the call on us to reason and picture for ourselves the characters is reduced to a minimum, and we give ourselves over for the

## SCRUTINIES II

moment to direct appreciation, which are *fertile* in this way, or lyric. In them language begins, by reason of the absence of argumentation, to take on an enhanced significance and to become, we say, transmuted.

But in a lyric passage the positive qualities merely predominate; they are not the only qualities. In a lyric passage the content, the characters (the material) of the action or meditation, or whatever it may be, are imposed from without, and although the language describing their activity is transmuted to language which, by its direct and immediate action on us, seems to possess a deeper meaning than the face meaning, the characters or material itself obeys in its behaviour the laws of something beyond the lyric passage. In a lyric page of an epic they obey the laws by which the action in the epic is governed, or in a poem in lyric manner they obey the general laws by which such characters, material, or reflections are governed in actual life (as, for example, in nature pieces, of which Mr Blunden's work affords us a wealth of examples).

In a lyric, however, every element is given over to direct positive qualities, and all aspects of the lyric are in more or less degree essentially significant. The content obeys only the laws that are made by the lyric, and necessarily hold only within the lyric. It is so built that it is a cosmos in itself, and its very form, with the *emergence* in it of its own laws of behaviour, and the union and interaction of these laws with

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

the structure, by which the language tends more and more to be transmuted into vaster meanings, all concentrate to make it maximally positive, maximally fertile. The lyric is the supreme expression in speech of our adjustment to our environment—to life and to death—which is why in the slipshod deduction of the common mind (which, without having the thought in focus—that is, without being conscious of it—never doubts for a moment in the necessity for *fertility*) it has become identified, as if it exactly corresponded, with song.<sup>1</sup>

Now Mr Eliot is interested (as any artist must at bottom be) above all else in the nature of life and death. But as his conscious conclusions are evidently so far from pleasant, far from being likely to reconcile him to his environment, it is fascinating to observe the way in which his real basic lyric impulse defeats his reason, takes command of him, turns insistently—nearly every time he puts pen to paper to communicate his gloomy conclusions to us—his would-be creed of sterility into a most curiously disguised creed of fertility. Yet so well disguised does it at first appear that many acute observers are deceived.

A writer in one of our weekly papers wrote about a year

<sup>1</sup> I have, unfortunately, no space here to consider how it is that the drunken singing that, according to Mr Hesse, makes the "seer" weep, is itself largely fertile. We are concerned strictly with Mr Eliot's view of the matter, and I think there is no question but that the singing has made him heavy at heart. His reference to *Blick ins Chaos* is also evidence of this.

## SCRUTINIES II

ago, "... if we take such books as ... and *The Waste Land*, they all seem to represent a common outlook, a highly sophisticated bitterness, a perception of futility without a resignation to it, a horror of sentimentality which increases to a distrust of beauty, and an intellectual honesty which ... the mood—brilliant, bitter, and despairing—which has inspired these and so many other modern books is a confession of sterility in itself. ...” And Mr Jack Lindsay, in his abundantly fertile *London Aphrodite* (No. 3), showed in a few notes that struck sharply and spitefully at Mr Eliot’s mortal heel, that Mr Eliot had indeed deceived him too, so that all he could see in Mr Eliot’s work was “each little dictum a drag-anchor pretending to be the Rock of Ages in the stormy conflict of reality.”<sup>1</sup>

For the actual fact is that there is no modern lyric poet, with the sole exception of Doughty (I am not sure about Mr E. E. Cummings), in whom the lyric impulse is so powerful, albeit the suppression of it so fierce. We must now see how ineffective that suppression has been, though how persistently it continues to cripple Mr Eliot.

<sup>1</sup> The criticism, for the very little distance it goes in analysis, is acute. But it is somewhat like criticising a camouflaged aeroplane as a piece of poor sterile impressionist painting if you, in any case by your own taste, do not like impressionist painting. No matter if for the moment the paint seems to be rotting the wings of the aeroplane, or splashed on by a liberal and somewhat agitated hand, clogging the mechanism of the motor. The painted frame and clogged motor still constitute an aeroplane, which may be expected, if cleared of its encumbrances, to fly very well again.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

In the early part of his work a complex of petty causes there is not room here to analyse inhibited his song, and from early manifestations of it, such as "*her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers*," drove him to "*laughter tinkling among the teacups*" and the "*burnt-out ends of smoky days*," to "*raising dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms*." There is—again let us not lose sight of that—from the very beginning the seed of our personality in us and our work; and that is why we can say it was only a complex of minor causes at first inhibited Mr Eliot's work. The conflict between impulse (early and undeveloped) and inhibition (still mainly a complex of petty causes) could at first produce no greater thing than Prufrock's after all *mesquin* deliberations. It was a juvenile Mr Eliot, a little over-concerned with "*a gesture and a pose*."

Yet, as the lyric impulse, to which cynic Prufrock could not give way (except for the "*Figlia che piange*," which is, I suspect, a sole remnant of an earlier set of work done before first, surface, sophistication had set in),<sup>1</sup> and which was thus dammed up, grew in strength, so did preoccupation with Goddess Drab grow stronger, especially since he began, for reasons of secondary importance here, with a weakness for this goddess. This innate weakness in him dangerously reduced his tolerance for the virus of Golden Bough disease

<sup>1</sup> The poem is set modestly last in the Prufrock batch, as too in the *Ara Vos Prec* volume. It seems, nevertheless, clearly to be at latest one of the earliest of the batch.

## SCRUTINIES II

—deducing too logical a conclusion from a view of life in which Sir James Frazer's\*panorama of the farce of human society occupies too large an area.

Mr Eliot, then, began to see life (while already alarmed before individual mortality) in a hideous vision of nations born, reproducing, dying; adding to comforts by virtue of organisation into society, and to do this being obliged to invent and believe vain similes from vegetable life; raising above themselves individuals on whose central leadership they depended for the highest in them, and yet with farcical ceremonial demolishing them; finally raising kings to gods and then crucifying them; and with all the vast body of them, slaves to a belief in magic, yet absorbed in their own momentary little pleasures and their own drab little comforts, often to such an extent absorbed in them as not merely to remain unconscious of the impending death of the whole body of which they are the fabric, but in their folly even to assist it to its death; or, if aware of it, to do nothing to save it, but *lachen beleidigten*.

An awful vision, a desperate vision, for one who is a trifle like Webster; and Webster, he tells us—

“ . . . was much possessed by death  
And saw the skull beneath the skin;  
And breastless creatures underground  
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.”

Difficult, especially if one is not like the facile Grishkin, who



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

stands for the qualities at the same time of the female and of the nations that are young in the world (in the springtime of their culture), for—

“ . . . even the *Abstract Entities*  
*Circumambulate her charm.*”

Difficult, if one is one of those for whom one sings, whose—

“ . . . *lot crawls between dry ribs*  
*To keep our metaphysics warm.*”

How was he to escape from the dilemma with, in spite of his sterile conclusions, that fertile impulse to sing within him? *The Waste Land* shows us his attempt to find a way.<sup>1</sup> The dismay at the light he felt he had obtained on that vanity of vanities, human individual effort, should be set forth in a poem in which the note of the seen should be predominant. The poem should be “metaphysical,” and this, in a moment when, because of his dismay, he felt least willing to let himself sing, seemed satisfying. Further, in his misery at the supposed impossibility (or unsuitability) of song, and his misery at seeing the “*skull beneath the skin*” in all the finer aspects of life, he would heavily stress those “*burnt-out ends of smoky days*,” make it clear not how exquisitely sordid (as he once might have tried), but how foully sordid and how stupidly sordid life is. And out of his poetic, Shelleyan impulse, and those forces that work to

<sup>1</sup> I hope I shall not be mistaken as presuming to perceive Mr Eliot's focussed (conscious) intentions. I merely mean that, whether focussed or not, the course of his own inner debate amounts to this.

## SCRUTINIES II

crush it, came that curious patchwork, *The Waste Land*. In it, in spite of himself, at the moment he least felt it possible and least felt he wanted to, he achieved what is, so far, the height of his lyric work.

Once again I must repeat that our essentials are to be found in our beginnings; and we must turn to an early poem, such as the *Portrait of a Lady*, to see the lyric (in the embryonic form of a lyric passage) crystallising out from the most unpromising solution of matter:

*"I take my hat; how can I make a cowardly amends  
For what she has said to me?  
You will see me any morning in the park  
Reading the comics and the sporting page.  
Particularly I remark  
An English countess goes upon the stage.  
A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,  
Another bank defaulter has confessed."*

It is the typical banal and sordid matter, which he is already arranging in situations, expressed in that fundamentally syllabic verse with which, countryman of Poe and student of French, he began. He goes on to confess:

*"I keep my countenance,  
I remain self-possessed."*

And then, further:

*"Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired,  
Reiterates some worn-out common song,  
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden  
Recalling things that other people have desired."*

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

There, in the very moment when he appears to be dwelling again on something low and sordid, he has, in spite of himself it would seem, broken here for a moment into pure English lyric style. The words are transmuted; they are so set as to make an average appeal to such of our associations as are apt to stir up emotional <sup>1</sup> memories. By being set with sufficient skill (very great skill indeed) to make the street piano and the common ballad it is clanging out unite with some treasured part of our own experience—pull at our heartstrings is a commoner way of putting it—the words, in spite of a clod of sentimentality which weighs them down, soar above the remainder of the passage.

We can see that he breaks into this lyric note *in spite of himself* by the way in which, to end the passage, he descends abruptly to earth. It is not so much, as I have tried to show above, because of any great general inhibition as early as this. It is merely the elegant young writer's concern lest he lose "*a gesture and a pose.*" With an annoying, taunting, matter-of-factness he breaks off and asks, not only himself, but us too, flatly—

*"Are these ideas right or wrong?"*

Or let us examine *Mr Apollinax*, where the concern for manner and smartness is indisputably predominant. There is Mr Apollinax at the very beginning, with his "*laughter tinkling among the teacups,*" and the ending of the poem is a

<sup>1</sup> I use *emotional* here in its ordinary popular meaning.

## SCRUTINIES II

triumph of triviality—"I remember a slice of lemon and a bitten macaroon." But in the middle of the poem—again in spite of himself—he produces that same lyric touch; even in the midst of a monstrous effort at preciousness. I must quote again:

*"He laughed like an irresponsible fœtus,  
His laughter was submarine and profound  
Like the old man of the sea's  
Hidden under coral islands  
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green  
silence,  
Dropping from fingers of surf."*

It is one of his dearest "situations," this one of "full fathom five," but how beautifully the "modernistic" smartness dies for a moment, after having achieved "*an irresponsible fœtus*," and lets the man sing:

*"Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green  
silence,  
Dropping from fingers of surf,"*

the two lines (bound up by, based on, marvellously subtle sound shifts) really sing, in spite of the harshness of that figure of the sea's surface as a hand with fingers letting the bodies fall.

It is extremely difficult, in health, to devour one's own progeny, and so I see him faced hopelessly, having produced it (and knowing, at bottom, its value), with the almost mellifluous, almost old-fashion beauty of "*drift down in*

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

*the green silence.*" But he recovers his state of "*a gesture and a pose*" very rapidly, and goes on, debonair as a moment before:

*"I looked for the head of Mr Apollinax rolling under a chair."*

He has snatched it back thus in one sweep to the extravagant and to the humdrum everyday, and makes part of Mr Apollinax (for a moment become nearly divine) an untidy object in an untidy room. But even this is not enough for him at this stage. He plods on further:

*"Or grimming over a screen  
With seaweed in its hair."*

Lest the image of Apollinax-old-man-of-the-sea (that he cannot bring himself, thank God, to destroy) should still be too prominent, he places him—his skull, with seaweed in it—peeping over a screen. I imagine he sees the screen as a symbol of the pettiest trappings of would-be comfort:

*"But where is the penny world I bought  
To eat with Pipit behind the screen?"*

And so, by sticking the drowned skull peeping above a screen, by one stroke he turns the image that was classic to discordant Gothic.

But this is early Eliot. The next set of poems is more curious. I leave the French lines out of count. The characteristic of this second section (*Gerontion* and the Sweeney poems) is the persistence in the poet's mind of one metallic

## SCRUTINIES II

swinging, singing kind of metre; the metre of the Sweeney poems, which crops out in *Gerontion* too, in that would-be unadulterated philosophising soliloquy. Let us note these prominent lines:

*"In the juvenescence of the year . . ."*

*"Vacant shuttles weave the wind . . ."*

*"An old man in a draughty house . . ."*

*"The tiger springs in the new year. . . ."*

There are others, too, that one feels to have been the same, but to have had their back broken by sticking in a word or taking one out. A good example is—

*"Beyond the circuit of the [shuddering] bear . . ."*

which, without the *shuddering* (the brackets are mine) is exactly of the type of—

*"Cast in the unstilled Cyclades. . . ."*

Even though the substance of the Sweeney poems is rarely of that quality of image or "transmuted" language that we find in the lyric, there is something essentially of popular lyric (or song) in the manner. All of them are excited; and not even, as one feels Mr Eliot would rather have wished, somewhat morbidly. They are heartily excited, even in the most morbid moments:

*"Princess Volupine extends*

*A meagre, blue-nailed, phthisic hand*

*To climb the waterstair . . ."*

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

the stanza begins, but then there is a sudden boisterous cry, almost as if in an Elizabethan play:

"To climb the waterstair. Lights, lights!  
She entertains Sir Ferdinand  
Klein. . . ."

In fact, taking the poems published in *Poems, 1909-1925*, in distant perspective, the second section shows an author at times despairing because he sees so clearly the pulsating rhythm of life that—

". . . at the mensual turn of time  
Produced enervate Origen"—

but yet all the time exultant about something. There is a secret *joie de vivre* in them. They are a curious mixture of material (often enough poorly co-ordinated), and it is in them that we most clearly see his growing tendency (being more interested in the historical aspect of man) to combine people and "situations" of antiquity and present day. The section is, formally, a triumph of lyric exultation, defeating despondency of death and of squalor; and if it is inclined to be without internal reason, that is because Mr Eliot is exulting primarily at his own discovery of the world, the discovery of how, by combining accepted situations and symbols and their modern equivalents, he may come to expression of his world vision. It is only in *Gerontion* (which must be later than most, if not all, of the Sweeney series) that the despair, on the larger view of human activity, is allowed to develop,

## SCRUTINIES II

to overcome his exuberance, and to overwhelm him. With which we return to *The Waste Land*.

It begins with a gloomy observation on the annual "turn of time." It passes to reminiscence of some woman and all her petty egocentric gabble; and then the natural cry comes clear—"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?" And we see the dismal answer (thus intended) turn on him, take a lyric form, with a fierce delight in the portrayal of Nature that reveals something generally well hidden in this urban writer. The soliloquy suddenly swells out into a rhetorical lyric,<sup>1</sup> with fine use of the parallelism we find in all of his earliest work.<sup>2</sup> The very material grows independent of the body of the poem and answers to its own laws. The clumsy oyster has deposited a pearl:

". . . Son of man;  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water."

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not self-contradictory.

<sup>2</sup> Early examples being:

"There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the world and days of hands,"

*Prufrock.*

"Strode across the hills and broke them,  
Rode across the hills and broke them."

*Cousin Nancy.*

It is one of his methods of obtaining structure without trite metre, rhyme, and so forth.



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

Under this, though twisted nearly out of all recognition, we can recognise the same undercurrent of metre as in the Sweeney poems. Let us go farther, and we shall see how true this is. Immediately following what I have quoted he returns to the simple, old undeveloped form of parallelism:

“ . . . Only  
There is shadow under this red rock  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

The final line (as if he felt triumphant at coming back to earth after a momentary flight) is full of boyish, animal delight. It is to be compared with that Elizabethan cry of “*Lights, lights!*” He is going to frighten us with spooks—and with that excuse he lets the girl, with a snatch of song (under the further excuse to himself of its being in German, thus as well as remoter, therefore less lyrical, also a smart trick) come back to her reminiscences.

In the same way, a little later, having broken for a moment into a lugubrious lyric of the crowd flowing under London Bridge, and, having found his words running away with themselves when he cries to Stetson, he tried to remember the corpses that he observes his verse, in spite of himself,

## SCRUTINIES II

describes too joyously. So he recovers his pose, and cries:

"*Oh, keep the dog far hence that's friend to man,  
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable—mon frère!*"

And with this he has become himself again, resumed control. Nothing, thus restored, is he less like than a man singing. But so satisfied is he with his recovery of his favourite gesture that he fails to see that his *gesture-words* are not in any way vital—that they merely emphasise the mosaic nature of the poem, and throw the embryo lyric they were meant to conceal into brilliant relief.<sup>1</sup> What is this "dog" other than a folklorist counter? It is *you*, the reader—"any," as he says in the opening to the notes on the poem, "*who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble.*" Thus beneath obscure allusions, the trappings of erudition, beneath purely incidental material, he buries those corpses, his lyrics, some of them stillborn before their time. In this very passage (lines 60-76) we have—

"... *Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.*"

---

<sup>1</sup> That is to say, these, as other, deliberately non-lyrical words have much more topical appeal than real appeal. That is why they serve their author's purpose for the moment. But we must not allow ourselves to be deceived by this appearance. Because during a few years (while it is the fashion) we find ourselves titillated by particular turns and tones of phrase, we must not forget that the appeal, by its very brightness and ease, is apt to be transitory: and that when the fashion passes these turns and tones of phrase will appear very dull stuff indeed.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

And if we feel there should be some elucidation of this, all we can find in the notes is delightfully bare: "*A phenomenon which I have often observed.*" Afraid lest we should take his passion for life, that comes out in the essentially lyric nature of his best passages, as a real thing, he takes refuge even behind such antics as this.

In the study of literature, as in the study of many another thing, there are various, presumably equally valid, ways of approaching our subject; various accounts of it which may equally be justified. We may examine a writer in his historical aspect, formally, as Russia's young school of critics would have one do exclusively. We may, on the other hand, concern ourselves more with the writer's content. Thus we may say that the tendency in Mr Eliot that culminated in *The Waste Land*, the tendency to fill his poem with mixed scraps of mixed erudition, was simply an elegant *procédé* taken over from Mr Pound. We may take still another standpoint—that it is all one to us whence he obtained certain *procédés*, just as it is all one to us whence he stole this line or that, this phrase or that, consciously or unconsciously; and further say that he was obliged to get some of his *procédés*, and many scraps of matter as well, from somewhere else; and that the important thing is to discover *why* he adopted this and not that, stole this and not that. It is from the latter standpoint that my present examination is made.

## SCRUTINIES II

I find that the scraps of quotation in the various languages he knows and the display of allusion is but a carapaceous covering, like that of the tortoise, containing itself no vital organs, but being merely an exaggerated form of protection; just as the mass of drab material (though here another element enters) is mainly a form of protection. Protection against what? Protection against his lyric mood. Protection lest, when it is so much more elegant to be sterile, he should be animal-like, lyric, fertile. Protection part-conscious, in so far as the fear of lyric mood is an argued-out fear; conscious, from his tragic view of the world; and protection part-unconscious—against the restricting forces (coming from his conscious vision of the world's decay) that inhibit his lyric impulse.

Thus we must look on the second section of *The Waste Land*—"A Game of Chess." What can the opening lines (77-96) be but a lyric? <sup>1</sup> It is simply pose, or affectation, or fear to let them stand by themselves in their self-sufficient beauty (or, say they had failed, tinsel) that made Mr Eliot pretend (or at least suggest) they are part of some philosophic whole. He immediately, with a marvellous standpoint shift, follows them, hoping to conceal their nature, with—

*"Above the antique mantel was displayed  
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene*

---

<sup>1</sup> By the relation of form to content reminiscent of *Kubla Khan*.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

*The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried . . . etc."*

But the shift of standpoint, the enlargement upon the scene carved upon the mantel, still does not satisfy his mania to conceal the lyric. The new passage, too, merged on the lyric. For a moment, even, the jumping, springing, clicking Sweeney metre poked through the thin skin of blank verse:

*"And other withered stumps of time  
Were told upon the walls. . . ."*

And so he takes refuge, in the last resort, behind familiar Goddess Drab. I leave aside the whole question of the development of drab material for poetry, the poetisation of the unpoetical, for that is so large a subject as to need many another paper; but it is essential to the subject of this one to indicate here that, when the drab is being poetised, it cannot long be left without the catalytic aid of accepted poetised, familiar, or even faded, language.

Thus Eliot cannot leave the playing with "nothing" in the conversation (with the *Shakesperian Rag* to follow) without drawing in, to bear the whole mass over the river of the reader's scepticism, a line from another poet, a strong enough line in Mr Eliot's ear, to bear the burden. This time it is his favourite situation supplies the helpful tag—

## SCRUTINIES II

"Those are pearls that were his eyes."<sup>1</sup> Further, in this section we are at we may note the same binding element to somewhat formless unfamiliarised material in the barman's familiar cry that recurs, and need scarcely try to repress a smile when we find that when he is disguising his poem as anything but lyrical, he cannot let us go without at least a trace of the opposite impression. But, consistent this time, he cloaks the concession too. His lyric sense of values dominates him in his most drab *épater le bourgeois* moments.

The third part of *The Waste Land*, perhaps containing the strongest felt pages in the whole of his published verse, illustrates in a bolder way than the first two the sweet deception of his attempt to create a modern form for the long poem. Bound together more than either of the preceding sections, or than the one remaining long section, in a consecutive whole—perhaps because the subject, sensual love, is naturally more close to Mr Eliot's heart (as to the heart of a lyric poet) than the more abstract considerations with which the other parts of the poem wish to deal—it is,

<sup>1</sup> This insertion of a line of established lyric quality has another aspect, in which we see Mr Eliot truly reflecting his time. In jazz music the chaos and any cacophony is supported on the sugary and simple arias of the saxophone or the human soloist. These little snatches of melody are generally themes taken, consciously or unconsciously, from accepted works of some standing. We may compare "Why did I kiss that girl?" and the second subject of Beethoven's Sonata, Op. III. Although, in such dance music, the superimposed theme contrasts most ludicrously with the "advanced" chromatic finery of the rest, it serves to fortify us by making us feel at home.

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

nevertheless, but a series of short poems. This will be eventually regarded, not as the poet's failure, but as his triumph; just as when Doughty is eventually commonly read and studied for his lyric pieces these, in spite of the massive edifice in which they are buried (and Doughty's conscious intention), will be more to his credit than his shame. We have moved perhaps, however little we would like to admit it, too far in the development of individual sensibility for it to be possible for an austere poem (such as seems to have been Mr Eliot's intention) to be ranked, if successful, as a poem at all. In architecture, let us remark, we have brought to too high perfection the production of both stable and comfortable private houses ever to be able, in this era of civilisation, to achieve again the relative magnificence of the Temple of Karnak, or even (to pass, on the road of development, to the nearest age before our own<sup>1</sup>) the Cathedral,

<sup>1</sup> I take it as admissible that a great new era of civilisation (culture in Spengler's terminology) began with the confinement period of the Industrial Revolution; the preceding age being the period, divided in two, from the crystallising out of Christianity until our present era. The cultural dividing point in this was, of course, the Renaissance. It seems to me clear that, whatever their magnificence *alone* (if such can exist), the most imposing modern buildings (dams or bridges) fail, are, *relatively* to ordinary architecture, less magnificent than those Egyptian temples which, even to-day, at least equal them in grandeur. It is, of course, quite possible that this era may be short, or even be merely the noisy tail-piece to what I would regard as the preceding one. In that case we should, side by side perhaps with a lower general level (a lower ambition) of general architecture, expect still more magnificent creations (such as a Channel Bridge), and, parallel to these, a rebirth of epic in Europe. But it would seem very improbable that this should be the development.

## SCRUTINIES II

say, of Reims. Thus it is no wonder if the perfection of *The Fire Sermon* is internal, the perfection of small sections of it; and if the poet's larger scheme has, even with its great achievement, failed. But we can well spare the architecture of a poem (for why should we cling to a form become inadequate to us) for such an opening line as "*The river's tent is broken.*"

Let us note, now, how this first lyric in *The Fire Sermon*, from "*The river's tent is broken . . .*" down to "*. . . chuckle spread from ear to ear,*" moves, gently and musically, from the suggestive announcement that suggests catastrophe, the invocation of autumn, down to the lugubrious thoughts of death that autumn provokes. The piece (somewhat elegiac in tone) rises, by this definite progression of one thought, in an exquisite lyric strain. But again, to bear the vulgar offerings to Goddess Drab (in which, earlier, he would brazenly and smartly have exulted), he brings in a well-known refrain that carries a passport loaded with all the good seals and *laissez passers* it could possibly need—the refrain of Spenser's "Prothalamion." But for once he has failed miserably. For once, at least, he has, in failing, actually triumphed. For once one feels the material has become so far transmuted to lyric that it could well dispense with the prop, which as we listen to it, having no use, clearly ceases to be a support and becomes itself a burden. If only he could give us this poem stripped



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

of this key to its conception<sup>1</sup> how grateful we should eventually be!

It would take more space than one paper warrants to analyse the whole of *The Waste Land*, even in broad outline. The essential tendency I have indicated. But the poem grows more interesting—more illustrative of Mr Eliot's inward struggle—as it proceeds; and I cannot resist pointing to the make-up of the following section, from "*A rat crept through the vegetation . . .*" to "*Et O ces voix d'enfants . . .*" (lines 187-202). It easily and obviously divides further into two (187-195; 195-202). Once more, self-conscious for having let himself go, he proceeds to direct his poem by reason and argument. But he soon tires of his efforts to involve Ferdinand of Naples with the rats, and it is (in answer to the Autumn, with the "*mensual turn of time*") Spring that sings in his ears. It is nothing that, for once, he sings unblushingly with another man's words (*cf.* note to line 196 in this section), for he makes the words his own; and the other man's words are unfamiliar enough for any of us not to make it a case of the other man helping Eliot out with his

<sup>1</sup> That the Spenser line was the nucleus crystal is, of course, based on mere supposition. Nevertheless, from my own experience and from examination of the processes by which focus is brought to bear on complexes of observation—by which thoughts and visions crystallise out—I conclude that it was rather that Spenser's line brought the poem down out of solution than that this was stuck in after. In saying that it is used to carry the other matter over, I merely mean that it is (although in this case unnecessary to the matter) retained for that purpose.

## SCRUTINIES II

burden. He sings then, and, singing, is brought back to Sweeney and an Australian ballad;<sup>1</sup> and, once more with characteristic gesture, he smooths over the reference to soda-water with the pretty-pretty line from Verlaine.

The remaining two sections of *The Waste Land* confirm our impressions. In the first one, *Phlebas le Phénicien*, the little set of verses in French that followed so inconsequently on the history of the *vieux lubrique* the *garçon délabré* (in *Dans un Restaurant*) reappear more gracefully clothed in Mr Eliot's more familiar tongue; make us wonder as to their origin; but at the same time make it clearer than ever that *The Waste Land*, for all the suggestion made by calling it a poem, is but a set of shorter poems, tending, as all vital work of a man will do, to deal with one general subject or aspect of things, and tacked together. In the final section, *What the Thunder Said*, almost as if it had, indeed, been written after and in succession to the rest (and, indeed, for all I can say, it may have been so), the gloom resettles, and the bursts of song—deeper buried than ever, more sternly censored—occur more rarely, though never less purely and genuinely.

Just as in the earlier parts of the poem rein was given to the libations to Goddess Drab (becoming a habit), now, as the poem is to draw to its close and we are to have the argument, we are to be beguiled into treating it as argument by

<sup>1</sup> “. . . it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia” (footnote to line 199). Here, indeed, we have the Mr Eliot who “célébra son jour de fête dans un oasis d’Afrique vêtu d’une peau de girafe.”

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

more and more display of erudition. To this, in so far as the poet's content is concerned, are we indebted for the three Sanscrit words, which, like a kind of numeration, a 1, 2, and 3, separate the last trifling lyric pieces which (but for the little shower of personal observations on the poem) end *The Waste Land*.

These last embryo lyrics scarcely fulfil the promise of the rest. Perhaps we should not be surprised, as they result from a definitely willed attempt to weld various fine fragments into a metaphysical whole. Rather should we remain delighted that Mr Eliot's lyric feeling has proved so powerful as even to turn these pieces of machinery to something nearly satisfactory. The first of them is but an outcrop from *Gerontion*. The second is marred sadly by over-use of that kind of repetition, developed from parallelism, which he tends to substitute, as cement, for the rhythmic carry-over of line to line ; and for the rhymes he carefully avoids, not so much because they are banal in his eyes as because they are suspect of being in league with his lyric impulse. It nevertheless ends—oh, if we could only separate, in all our poets, perfect fragments from failed wholes—with two most perfect lines :

*Only at nightfall ethereal rumours  
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus.*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> As printed, I admit, this appears to read : “. . . each confirms a prison only at nightfall, ethereal rumours . . . etc.,” but no one, I think, will ever read it but by thus detaching the two lines, with the vision of so large a sector of life that they evoke.

## SCRUTINIES II

But isolated fragments do not save the whole. The section, lines 377-384 ("*A woman drew her long black hair out tight . . .*"), is fine, but the vision is a confused one. The others, before they achieve their song, are sterilised by wilful argument and by mannerism proceeding from argument; as in the empty repetition, merely the basis on which to work, but left like half-dismantled scaffolding, in lines 387-388—"about the chapel there is the empty chapel"; and the arbitrary statement, "Dry bones can harm no one," which, suddenly appearing in a passage magic with its suggestion, jars hideously.

For the moment (after the promise of the early part of the poem) the forces working against lyric, the inhibition to sing, have begun to triumph. But there is also, in *What the Thunder Said*, a much more ominous sign for us of Mr Eliot's skill.

*"After the torchlight red on sweaty faces,  
After the frosty silence in the gardens,  
After the agony in stony places,  
The shouting and the crying,  
Prison and palace and reverberation  
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains,  
He who was living is now dead,  
We who were living are now dying . . ."*

This is how *What the Thunder Said* begins. That is after—in spite of, let us say—the turn of autumn and winter

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

and spring—in spite of all the annual renewal—not only is the last year's king dying (making way for the next), but we too are dying. For the moment it would seem that the fear of mortality, the trembling Sir James Frazer has unwittingly made chronic in his victim, has been conquered, and tranquillity has supervened. Just as Gerontion scorned those who drag out their individual life with pungent sauces and stimulate their lust in rooms with many mirrors, and was dignified before his death, we feel that here the poet, though he does not explicitly say so, has achieved a dignified calm before the scene that has appalled him, not only of his own mortality, but of the mortality and the vanity of all human society.

But not so! There is a mean coda to this almost noble song of human despair. There is even, one must not hesitate to say, a curious touch of Prufrock, a flaccid, disillusioned cynicism—for to “*We . . . are now dying*” he adds, with a glib sneer,

“*With a little patience.*”

If these are the

“*. . . fragments I have shored against my ruins,*”

then woe to those fine ruins, with such decaying material in a vital part of the shoring! “*Shantih, shantih, shantih.*” If, as his note assures us, “*the peace which passeth all understanding*” is indeed a “*feeble translation of the content of this*

## SCRUTINIES II

word," that final mumbo-jumbo word is curiously belied by that earlier aside ". . . *with a little patience*," reminding us more of one

*" Politic, cautious, and meticulous "*

than of one like Gerontion, who could declare

*" I have lost my passion; why should I keep it,  
Since what is kept must be adulterated? "*

Then, to our sorrow, we find, when we pass on to *The Hollow Men*, which is dated 1925, that in the struggle between despair, largely resultant on reading Frazer, and natural song, the triumph of Mr Eliot (in *The Fire Sermon*, which he himself, in a note, seems to understand to be the height of *The Waste Land*) was, indeed, but a temporary triumph. By "*with a little patience*" he showed the despair welling up in him again; and the title, the two epigraphs, the very opening of *The Hollow Men*, show us how fiercely he clutches at the nearest straws to free himself from "death by drowning" in the deceitful mere into the deeps of which he has been beguiled. The imagery is drawn from the earlier poems; distilled down and clarified, worn bare even, in an amazing way. The language is diabolically cleverly made use of; his peculiar development of parallelism absorbs other elements of form; there are magic lines, such as

*" Sunlight on a broken column,"*

## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

but yet the whole does give us, indeed, the painful impression of its own declaration :

*" Paralysed force, gesture without motion."*

One thing at least he has achieved—for we can see part of *The Hollow Men* in an earlier form as *Doris's Dream Songs* in the "Chapbook Miscellany" for 1924—he has stripped the poem of immediate considerations stimulated by the "Untergang des Abendlands" kind of speculation, and has confined it to the general consideration of life. In *Doris's Dream Songs* he declared :

*" I saw across the blackened river  
The camp fire shake with alien spears ;  
Here, across Death's other river  
The Tartar horsemen shake their spears."*

The lines, which bear the marks of rough sketch, at least enable us to be refreshed by their disappearance; the Slavonic (or Tartar) menace to civilisation (the menace of the Eastern plains) had never merited such perturbation as he nearly decided to record.

One other aspect of *The Hollow Men* is interesting—that the dead, dry, crumbling matter of this poem is still *sung*, had been first conceived of as *Dream Songs*. Section five of it is the most terrible: the pinnacle of a Prufrock cathedral—had Prufrock had, not merely brains, but heart

## SCRUTINIES II

enough too, to realise so stupendous a despair as there had to be for the man who could once write

*" I shall not want Honour in Heaven  
For I shall meet Sir Philip Sidney  
And have talk with Coriolanus  
And other heroes of that kidney,"*

to end his first collected book of poems with the untrue blasphemy of

*" This is the way the world ends,  
This is the way the world ends,  
This is the way the world ends,  
Not with a bang but a whimper."*

The singer who sang

*" This music crept by me upon the waters  
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.  
O City, City, I can sometimes hear  
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
And a clatter and a chatter from within  
Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls  
Of Magnus Martyr hold  
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold "*

seems, in his grappling with a monster—fruit of the union of Goddess Drab and a mistaken scion of Sir James Frazer—to have left the struggle and fled pell-mell down a very short blind alley. Still is he tormented by song, but in a very few years he has gone from the magic fulness of that *"music creeping by me upon the waters"* to a sort of shadow of meta-



## THE LYRIC IMPULSE

physics that has got little enough warmth from between his ribs.<sup>1</sup>

All our creation is an organic growth; and it is supremely difficult to make jumps. One can therefore only hope that Mr Eliot is making recovery, with as little of the pain as possible in that long period while the blood creeps back to numbed and paralysed limbs. Then, no doubt, once more they will be able to make gestures—though, please God, human, and not Sweeney gestures, and with motion, and, as far as possible, without pose. The *Fragment of an Agon*, published in the *Criterion* for January 1924, makes it impossible to say more than that there is considerable hope in one direction—because the instinct for song is clearly as powerful as ever; but there are grounds for apprehension in another direction.

In 1922 Mr Joyce let behemothean *Ulysses* come crashing into the world, and Bloom has suggested to Eliot a possible road out of his blind alley. It was, since *Ulysses* was obviously accessible only to a few (a book for writers), most unfortunate that he felt obliged to take as his *Ulysses* a man of the class and the upbringing of Mr Bloom. The experiment of form and style, the scalpel of the network of sexual preoccupations under our everyday activity, were not necessarily dependent on a hero whose life moved in

<sup>1</sup> It is no matter if Mr Eliot does pronounce for building on a certain religious tradition, as he has done in his recent *For Lancelot Andrewes*. We are concerned here with his work, and the significance of his work.

## SCRUTINIES II

the world of Goddess Drab. But it is of small help lamenting this. There can only be one such monster made in a generation; and it is made, and we have to reckon with it. Its influence on Eliot has been obvious. How, since *The Hollow Men* said the last word for him in *The Waste Land* line of development, can he break into song and still avoid the painful self-consciousness of singing what others have sung before (and the danger of singing like them)?

Now Mr Joyce's tribute to Goddess Drab has shown him the way to sing, and to be novel, and to "reflect his age," all simultaneously. What had previously been incidental in him has now, for a time only it must be hoped, become the whole of him. Sweeney has been a little degraded, and the preoccupations of the looser part, now of the lower urban class (Mr Eliot has always been urban), have for the moment become the material of poetry. For the moment, alas! he is in no danger to his self-esteem of doing what, to our great fortune, he has so often done hitherto—either of treating *l'ombre come cosa salda*, or of the opposite. It is either of these (though he has momentarily forgotten it) that is the matter of lyric poetry, because lyric poetry is by its nature a creation, an affirmation of positive things, an exultant declaration of fertility.

ALEC BROWN.

THE CRITICAL METHOD  
OF T. S. ELIOT

Two

## THE CRITICAL METHOD OF T. S. ELIOT

*by*

BERTRAM HIGGINS

MR ELIOT is more concerned than most writers to keep his general and his particular criticism apart, and for reasons special to his task the critic of his method finds it advisable to divide his comments accordingly. For he sees the same method ruling in both departments of his author's work, and yet the general criticism appears comparatively unsatisfactory, in ways not to be accounted for by reference to the difficulties proper to abstract thought. It appears, indeed, that the method which is an almost unqualified success in the particular criticism, when extended to the general, results in obscurities of a peculiar kind: peculiar, because their occurrence is so bound up with the nature of

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

the illumination that when this is at its brightest their darkness is most intense.

Mr Eliot's particular criticism is extraordinarily free from obscurity, the usual causes of which are vagueness of expression and disarrangement of thought. The outstanding qualities of his prose relate themselves all to the virtue of clarity more closely than to any other single requisite of criticism. And his thought is shaped by a limiting sense rigorous beyond the requirements of keeping to the subject: he is apt to refine his remarks on a subject until they point unswervingly to one or two aspects of it, and in sacrificing effects of general validity, show a gain of particular but poignant truths.

Most styles from time to time reveal opposed impulses either struggling for dominance or being satisfied in alternation. Some styles derive their whole impetus from such a process, on the principle of the internal combustion engine. With Mr Eliot these issues, if they arise at all, are disposed of off paper. He treats his material in the manner of a champion playing an amateur; gives it many moves before he starts his game. As a result, in this style it is often possible to see in conflict, not broadly opposed impulses, but tendencies so akin that in prose less rarified they are taken for allies: the dissociative faculty in conflict with the analytical, the generalising with the speculative, concision with precision. With another writer we might take pleasure

## SCRUTINIES II

in seeing how close to the wind he sails—how, for instance, by the abrupt introduction of an idea or an image just short of the far-fetched, he pulls together a dispersed passage which a far-fetched idea or image would have precipitated in instant ruin. The delight we feel in watching an exhibition in which skill and luck are combined—in which the luck is so bound up with the skill that it is impossible to disentangle them (the skill, however, must appear never the lesser quantity): this is a delight which literature is not debarred from offering. It is not the kind of pleasure that we connect with the prose of Mr Eliot. There can be no doubt that he, as any other writer, gains by and counts upon a certain measure of intellectual luck; but it would be unusually difficult to detect in his work the transitions of skill and luck. The writing is all of a piece, and passages are not readily detachable. (In this the prose offers a contrast to the later verse, where line-statements more or less discrete, arranged in paragraphs more or less autonomous, leave the connecting tissue largely dependent on voluntary action by the reader.) Its progress is arranged on an economy that keeps the first details moving within the latest, at an adjusted pace; and the timing of the argument, the emergence of its main conclusions at the points where they will be most effective, is procured not by sudden emphasis but simply by an absence in those statements of the qualifications which mark the others. The best analysis of such qualities of

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

style, and demonstration of their value, is furnished by Mr Eliot himself in his comments on Lancelot Andrewes, Arnold, Newman, and F. H. Bradley. In his own prose sometimes, so close is the effort to present without interposing ("the progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality"), the irreducible minimum of rhetoric is reached and the argument commences to disengage a pure and fugal music of its own. When a brief rhetorical period does appear it affects one as the most deliberate thing in the world (I once read in a Jesuit case-book a disquisition on the moral issues involved in a well-timed as distinct from a spontaneous display of emotion).

Mr Eliot's most valuable criticism is achieved when his "awareness of all that has been said on a subject in the past" does not keep him at defining the conditions for a new view, but allows him to proceed to its formulation. For then the hard circumstances from which it issues virtually guarantee that it shall be, not merely a dynamic image of the truth (Mr Eliot's dramatic sense of the needs of the present is very acute), but the permanent objectification of a portion of it. Instances of this are to be found in the extraordinarily fine destructive-reconstructive essay in "The Sacred Wood" which aims to "remodel the image of Jonson which is settled in our minds," in the essay on "Hamlet and his Problems," and in the demonstration of Marlowe as a great writer of

## SCRUTINIES II

farce. (Elsewhere it appears in the locating and salvaging of an old wreck—Andrewes—which is shown to be, like the galley of Lake Nemi, in a remarkable state of preservation.) These are perfect successes, flowerings of Mr Eliot's method. The essay on Dryden is equally elaborate in what it undertakes to do, for in it is outlined one of the most important of the tasks which Mr Eliot has set himself, the disinflation and re-assessment of the reputations of the nineteenth-century romantic poets. But the case is admittedly incomplete, and it gives small actual support to the pretensions of certain disciples of Mr Eliot (I do not mean Mr Herbert Read, who stands, though somewhat shakily, on his own legs) who attempt to wrest a ready-for-use critical instrument from the doctrine of classicism while that doctrine is in the early stages of formulation—the growing structure of a few minds, but, in the main, hardly more than a promising reaction of sensibility. It is perhaps in the third class of Mr Eliot's criticism, however (if such a division is not too arbitrary), that the working of his method is clearest to be seen; in the study of Professor Babbitt's Humanism, for instance, where the amending of the Professor's proposition Humanism—→ Religion, by the proposition Humanitarianism←—Professor Babbitt's Humanism, shows up the latent weakness of his subject's position. Here the main purpose, after a false identification is proved, is to restate a problem. It is typical of Mr Eliot in that the positive gains are not effected by the



## THE CRITICAL METHOD

introduction of one central conception which displaces the conventional order of the details; Instead, the details are rearranged within that order down to their last items, they enter into new combinations, and if it is sometimes a direction they attain rather than a conclusion, it is a direction like that of the compass-needle, at once a test of the subject's soundness and true to the conditions on which it holds its existence.

It is difficult to account for the fact that there is in Mr Eliot's work, co-existent with its admirable attachment to the subject, a peculiar self-consciousness, *i.e.* an attitude to the *reader*. It is, on the whole, a repressive attitude. I do not mean the personal crotchets which occasionally break through, and which would be taken for granted in a more self-indulgent writer. The repressiveness is not composed of the odds and ends of personality; its action is fairly constant and, to my mind, considerably minimises the power of the work. Sometimes it manifests itself in a point of detail (serious, however, in its consequences) by the introduction into the crisis of an argument of melodramatic understatements, by which I mean those wilful and even histrionic lowerings of tone which announce, not so much that something has gone wrong with the works, as that the valued performer, for reasons not apparent to the audience, has chosen the psychological moment to walk out on the show. This is serious, because, while it might pass for a

## SCRUTINIES II

vagary in a writer not incapable of essential frivolity, in Mr Eliot it can hardly signify anything else but a capacity for betrayal; and though the actual argument previous to its intervention may remain intact, the whole surrounding context is involved in the deterioration of *morale*. That is an occasional detail. But what is chronic in the attitude mentioned is a certain cautionary preoccupation with the reader, a directing anxiety, a tendency to insist on setting the tone of the reader's response. I am not holding a brief for the reader; it is the criticism itself that is marred by any overt and persistent attitude of this kind. For it is bound to inhibit many possibilities of the writer's theme, as well as the full freedom of response necessary for a proper germination of the new ideas. If, as Mr Eliot avers, "the free intelligence is that which is wholly devoted to enquiry," it seems unavoidable that this intelligence can only remain free by accepting the risk of its ideas being misunderstood or misapplied. The critic who is too intent on consolidating his conclusions with most of his readers constrains himself to turn down opportunities of prompting the few to further realisations. Moreover, the critic like Mr Eliot, who proposes a truly revolutionary programme of change and reintegration, is likely to depress by such an attitude the very qualities which would have to be encouraged in most of his readers before they could accept any radical change in their lives or their ideas.

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

This defect in Mr Eliot is perhaps connected, but it must not be confused, with an overmastering quality of his thought as continuous as the lucidity of his style: its prudence. Prudence has been for long discredited in life, and therefore in literature; with wearisome results for both. It has become more and more confined in its meaning, and consequently in its practice, until now it is generally identified with the pusillanimities of a purely "prudential" ethic. It is not necessary to dwell on the historical causes of the word's and the virtue's degradation. They are mainly those which Mr Eliot is concerned to show as the sources of many of our modern errors, namely, "liberal Protestantism," industrial individualism, and romanticism in literature. The first movement made prudence as an intellectual quality suspect, by regarding it as a special adjunct of the spiritual authority; the second dropped it from behaviour, regarding it as a hindrance in an expansive economic scheme; and the third, by popularising an idea of heroism in which the audacity of Ajax was held to be in no need of the supporting gift of Ulysses, consummated the process, in thought and life, in a way of which only art is capable. Yet, if we distinguish prudence from caution, which is ineluctable in the technique of thought and expression, we see it as a *gift* of the highest order—that is, we see it, not as a necessary constituent of the act of thinking, but as one of the essentials (the rarest at the present time) of ideal greatness of mind. And if we

## SCRUTINIES II

consider the derivation of the word, its connection with that "providence" which of all the qualities of conscious mind is chosen as the one most worthy of godhead, we will understand the novel dignity it can bestow on the thought of a man in whom its principle lives again.

Foresight, sagacity, anticipation of and preparation for the future: this providence in Mr Eliot is not brought into play only when the argument would seem to call for it; it is not utilised dialectically; it operates at the roots of his thought and is suffused throughout its instinctive movements. A critic with thoroughly practical instincts is not the same as one whose interests simply are practical; for it needs a strong tide to make an inlet into the future, a steady onrush of perceptions; and the critic whose submerged perceptions have not already a direction will find them ultimately unmanageable, straying like waves to any shore, and, like waves, always falling back on themselves. The lack of providence in the representative writers of the period which precedes that of Mr Eliot—the period of Mr Kipling—has made their constructive work, their "messages," ephemeral to an extent that cannot be explained merely by the supposition that every generation is apt to turn against or away from its immediate predecessors. Mr Kipling himself, with the exception of Conrad perhaps the most gifted writer of his age, is an unequivocal case to consider, since unlike his equally celebrated contemporaries he has not been much

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

occupied by the criticism of ideas. In his vision of a race transfigured by the imperial virtues, the brutalities of spirit of his heroes when "off duty" might have been exploited artistically—that is to say, dealt with in such a manner that the brutality appearing an inevitable concomitant of the heroism, an inescapable result of the same discipline, would either come in for a share of the admiration which the heroism arouses in the reader, or for the whole of the pathos which it precludes in the work. This would, indeed, have been an achievement on the grand plan. But such a form is not achieved in Mr Kipling. The brutality of his characters becomes a subject in itself—in fact, a main subject. The vigorous idealism is perverted because it is balked of its object; and it is balked of its object because, by a failure of providence in the mind of its creator, the ideal scheme is not fortified to resist the accretion of minor elements within it. And here Mr Eliot's formula of the "objective correlative" comes in pat. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding 'an objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." This formula perhaps only applies in its strictness to poetic art. But Mr Eliot goes on to say (he is speaking of *Hamlet*), "The artistic 'inevitability'

## SCRUTINIES II

lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is in *excess* of the facts as they appear." Such a fine clarification as this should not be pulled out of its context. But to remark its relevancy to the work of Mr Kipling (without going into the question of why the British Empire eludes his "particular emotion," while the British Merchant Marine confirms Conrad's), and indeed of many writers, is to be provided with an example of the intellectual power in Mr Eliot working a particular perception to such a point that, without ceasing to be a particular perception, it presents itself as a new criterion applicable to all works of literature; it prints itself doubly on the memory, once in romans, as it were, and once in italics. Many critics might have noticed the inadequacy "of the external to the emotion" in *Hamlet*; but to discover the emotion's *excess* over the external is not only a deepened perception and not only a new criterion of judgment, but also a daring speculation on the potentialities of emotion.

"We ourselves account such a man for *provident*," says Raleigh, "as remembering things past and observing things present, can, by judgment, and comparing the one with the other, provide for the future." It would seem that Mr Eliot's instinct for the future, unsettling in its urgency, requires a "balance" in a consciousness of the past appropriately weighty. In his essay "Tradition and the Individual

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

Talent" a theory of the relation of a poem to tradition, to other poems in the past, takes precedence of a theory of its relation to its author. Here the poet is said to have "not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways." But the whole of literature "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order"; and the test of a poet's value is that he should conform, or "cohere" to this order. This necessity is "not one-sided," for it results in an alteration, if ever so slight, of the whole existing order; "and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new."

The theory, as it appears in its fulness in the essay, is marked by Mr Eliot's customary carefulness of expression. It differs from most other theories of poetry first of all by its deliberate avoidance of the metaphysical issue ("This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism"). The psychological statement (the poet has "a medium") is left high and dry, and in place of a theory of mind to explain the relation of this "medium" to the personality which it transcends, we are given a conception of Tradition by reference to which, it is suggested, the significance of the poem itself will be established. Where Coleridge, for instance, had resort to metaphysics, or the French Symbolist

## SCRUTINIES II

poets to philological speculation—at those crucial stages of the problem where a study of the connections of poetry and knowledge, or of the connection of words with their objects, exercised these writers—Mr Eliot proposes a study of the connections of poem with poem in “the living whole” of actual poetry. But this conception of tradition is only “suggested,” it is not worked out, and as it stands seems to require a good allowance of “metaphysics or mysticism” to make it more than an object of faith. Lacking such amplification, it simply transfers the necessity of speculation from the subject of the poem’s relation to its author, to the subject of its relation to other poems by other authors, and lands Mr Eliot in the very quandary which, by setting aside due consideration of the former subject, he seemed determined to avoid. The theory of the poet as a “medium” is preceded by the statement that “the point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul”; but not much is advanced to show why the theory of the unity of tradition, in the sense of Mr Eliot’s definition, is any more worthy of credence. No definite instructions are given as to how it can be decided whether a poem “fits in.” “The test . . . can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual and may conform. . .” Mr Eliot seems here to be reduced to the



## THE CRITICAL METHOD

ambiguous situation which he reveals and deplores in Professor Babbitt's doctrine of "the inner check" as the final ethical principle; he advances as an objective standard what is without sanction, and ultimately a matter of personal bias.

The point of method exemplified in this theory of poetry is a central point in Mr Eliot's method. It is the device of securing utter clarity to the argument by eliminating from it those issues (not side-issues) which, for reasons apparent in the context, are insusceptible of equally definitive treatment. I call it a device, since it is necessary to distinguish such an enhanced use of the limiting method from the limiting processes inseparable from all intellectual work. Mr Eliot's use of this device in his particular criticism is nearly always justified, for in isolating for consideration certain qualities of a writer he can illuminate the whole subject, the only condition being that the writer should be a good writer in the sense that his work is an actualised coherence. But if the critic is dealing with an abstract subject directly (that is, not primarily with other writings on that subject), the limiting device ends as it begins, by restricting the subject, and its gains cannot wipe out but only be set against its losses. For a general subject is not an actualised coherence, but a radiating centre of possibilities which are directed and bounded by the "terms of reference" in its nomenclature. Therefore to follow up one essential

## SCRUTINIES II

line of inquiry in such a subject and entirely to shun another is to benefit a part and not the whole, for the part tends to become a subject independent of it. To present a general question from one angle, because that approach was the only one which led to indisputable finds, is, of course, for certain purposes, a sensible thing to do; perhaps the most useful result is that the question presented "from a new angle" stimulates the reader's interest; and so new energy is set free for its comprehension as a whole. But it is to be doubted if any method can be finally satisfactory which does not give equal and concurrent treatment to all primary issues, recognising in practice as well as in theory their interdependence. This interdependence certainly entails modifications and sacrifices in those portions of the argument which are favoured by the knowledge of the age or the special aptitudes of the writer. But though clarity is an absolute ideal on the plane of expression, on the other plane the passion for definitive results can actually be evil if it is not kept subservient to the ideal of completeness. After my remarks on Mr Eliot's providence I need hardly say that this incompleteness is neither a matter of the intellectual ability to see a subject in all its aspects, nor of the "Negative Capability" of which Keats speaks, the stamina required for putting up with portions of the truth when the whole is unavailable. It is simply one of method, of the subsequent decision as to how the subject should be presented. In face of the definite

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

gains of this method it might be fanciful to lay too much stress on those losses which are not precisely calculable. It must suffice to add that the method which, in the instance we have just given, made necessary the relegation of certain issues which it seemed unsatisfactory to relegate, entails also in its normal working a treatment of ideas in which those of them which are found unfit for a specific purpose are apt to be rejected absolutely—ideas which would ordinarily be sent to limbo are consigned to hell: and that these ideas, which cannot properly be rejected on absolute grounds, are still living, able to enter into new formations, and formidable to the structures which refused them in their humbler capacities.

Mr Eliot recently published (in an edition of Dryden's *Dramatic Poesie*) a dialogue on Poetic Drama. His own opinions, as he informs us, are divided amongst the various speakers; but though there is a certain humorous irresponsibility about the discussion, it is clear that the person designated B represents most of his riper judgments. In the course of this discussion, then, B says: "You can never draw the line between æsthetic criticism and moral and social criticism; you cannot draw a line between criticism and metaphysics; you start with literary criticism, and however rigorous an æsthete you may be, you are over the frontier into something else sooner or later. The best you can do is to accept these conditions and know what you are

## SCRUTINIES II

doing when you do it. And, on the other hand, you must know how and when to retrace your steps. You must be very nimble." This method has enabled him to penetrate fruitfully into many subjects without the aid of grandiose hypotheses; his structures win beauty by economising on their temporary supports. It is the analytical method installed as unconditional regent during the long minority of the Synthesis. I do not propose to discuss the recent, religious phase of Mr Eliot's thought. His volume of essays *For Lancelot Andrewes* is "an indication of what may be expected," but it would be premature to offer criticism of "a general point of view which may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" before the three "small volumes" have appeared in which this general point of view will be presented. The change was perhaps foreshadowed before this preliminary announcement by the increasing emphasis laid on certain formulas. For instance, the test of good criticism that it should not be "the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish," and the test of "purity"—tests which one would have thought to conduce simply to the *analysis* of a work—are now uniformly applied to determine its *value*. But until we witness the event, what Remy de Gourmont said of Leonardo da Vinci as scientist describes well the kind of consistency that in Mr Eliot's thought survives the strong separating action of his method: ". . . il se range, comme

## THE CRITICAL METHOD

c'est son habitude, du côté de la tradition secrète, du côté de l'opinion la plus logique, la plus belle, la plus riche en conséquences. . . . Il parle en philosophe dégagé des préjugés, non en savant."

BERTRAM HIGGINS.



Three

ALDOUS HUXLEY

# Three

ALDOUS HUXLEY

*by*

MARY BUTTS

THERE remain from a Victorian childhood certain tags in the memory, axioms of one's cultivated aunts, chiefly appreciative of the dead. Too much perhaps of one's adolescence was spent in forgetting them, or in standing them on their head—no one has shown better than Mr Huxley how hard it is to form a standard of one's own—but finally they emerge again, rather mysteriously dull. There is one in particular on Italian art that flashes through the brain: a single phrase accompanied by the memory of a lovely, secular Madonna holding up a gay baby, by Andrea del Sarto; and one remembers that Andrea del Sarto was called the Perfect Painter, and that the sentence implied a tragic, almost *risqué*, paradox.

One does not go to picture-galleries to look at del Sarto



## ALDOUS HUXLEY

now. I do not remember one up-to-date *Kunstforscher* who mentions him, only that an ancient author—Alcæus, I think—spoke of the perfect work of art as having necessarily some quality of strangeness, “*like a blemish in the joint of a well-shaped body.*” Rodin left pieces of raw stone about his statues. That was certainly not del Sarto’s way. The paradox implied by the old-fashioned criticism was that to be perfect was equivalent to death, or to being dangerously nearly dead. As to del Sarto, it is easy to imagine our present cultivated reactions to what I remember as over-sweetened loveliness. The exact quality of beauty implied by loveliness is out of fashion now, and the comparison goes no further than to say that it would be easy to make out a case for Mr Huxley as the Perfect Writer, and then to ask what that implied in the case of so different an artist.

In an essay on Breughel Mr Huxley enumerates the qualities which give that painter his value, and which to-day are a hindrance to his fame: that he is very technically competent, a master of composition; that his colour is brilliant and pleasing; that he has a unique personal view of his world and plenty to paint about it. Finally, that out of his panorama of Flemish life, a reality emerges he has not by any conscious symbolism set out to paint: that, for example, the soldiers come to kill the Innocents are Jack Frost and his band, hunting the first green shoots of the spring. In the same way, Mr Huxley fulfils exactly

## SCRUTINIES II

what he has set out to do: within certain limits he is everything the kind of writer that he is should be. His technique is perfect: he has more than plenty to say—there is practically no subject of interest he cannot illuminate; and if his sense of form—with the exception of *Antic Hay*, a novel which seems to have “come off” as entirely as an artist could wish—can be called unsatisfactory, the varied chaos of our life to-day makes crises and conclusions uncommonly hard to find. Each society, each association of men has its full stop, when its form, however often it is to be repeated, becomes evident. We have not reached that point. Mr Huxley’s interest in life, then, is wide: he sees vividly everything he sees. His scholarship is deep, unpedantic, almost obsolete: his science is science, not an emotional dishing-up, a false attempt to “humanise” new facts. His mind is grave, ironic, merciful, witty, and profoundly curious—*homo sum*, in fact. At a time when “morality” is wholly at a discount, when a writer would shrink “as though at an act of exhibitionism” at the idea of teaching anybody anything, or having any standard but the purely æsthetic, Mr Huxley manages to indicate indignation, compassion, contempt reinforcing these essentially moral judgments by arriving at them at the end of a line of tolerance and self-distrust produced to infinity, and only susceptible to measure at its points of pity and disgust. There is self-distrust also, and he is sparing of admiration, so much so

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

that one remembers what Shaw wrote on Dr Johnson and how education in England lames certain great minds: ". . . for Johnson's great mind was lamed, else he would not have spent his days talking in cafés when he might have been shaking England with the thunder of his spirit." Accept Aldous Huxley as the perfect writer. There is hardly one to-day who shares his knowledge of men, his interest and love of all that is most interesting, and his critical judgment on our scene. Yet, at the end, one is left with his own expressed dissatisfaction: "What is it for?" "*Cui bono?*" What reason is there for our frustration and pain? And one feels that he exaggerates his modesty: that it is Mr Huxley's business to tell us a little more than he does.

He began as a poet, the one thing one is certain that he is not. *Leda* never appeared to one more than a young man's effort to write a classic story "straight," in the grand manner, with some modern trimmings. There is a fragment of Sappho on the affair—"Even Leda found a blue egg"—which seems to say all that there is to be said on God-as-a-Swan: also a bas-relief in Venice, rarely reproduced.

*Crome Yellow* was the first novel, the colour a favourite on Mr Huxley's palette, neither orange or lemon, on a green base or a red; a tired "amusing" colour, favoured by nature when nothing particular is happening to the weather. Here, for the first time, he introduces the character series

## SCRUTINIES II

he is to use again and again, re-dressed, re-situated, but his characteristic types. It is difficult to decide on re-encountering them, turned almost to poetry in *Antic Hay*, through *Those Barren Leaves* to *Point Counterpoint*, whether they develop or not in dimension: how far Anne of *Crome Yellow* lives more in Lucy Tantamount or less. For she is the same woman. Does Mr Huxley know more about her, or has he lost himself in the labyrinth of his suffering Cressida? In the first book he loved her more. There has been love lost; that is sure. Only as Myra Viveash in *Antic Hay* she walks out of the page, elicited not by analysis but by poetry

*My men like satyrs grazing on the lawns  
Shall with their goat-feet tread the antic hay.*

Mr Huxley writes his novels under the form of a masque; human beings presented under a conventional disguise, a stylisation of their human rôles. One has one's age's taste for formal shapes, and to the writer they seem none the worse for the superficial abstraction of their dress. There are critics who object, who complain that with one or two exceptions his characters lack reality. The exceptions quoted were a child and an old man; but it seems no more than a change of method to represent certain characters with their masks off. Shearwater is another instance, and Gambril senior, types of sincerity and single-mindedness whose nature it is not to wear a mask. Like all ballet-work,

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

Mr Huxley's stories are full of repetitions and repeats. Infinitely varied, they have more affinity with music than any other prose writings of to-day; not by choice of language or cadence—he is incapable of conscious “fine-writing”—it is done by the movement of his characters and arrangement of situation. All writers have to some extent their recurrent types and events, their masque. In Mr Huxley's work one is perhaps sensible to it for some structural reason in the building-up of his prose. And his masque is uniquely his own, a series of sonatas—allegro, rondo, andante—our young society in action. And hardly one that could not be labelled “unfinished symphony.”

There are the elderly protagonists, the “art dowagers” he seems to have suffered under. Mrs Aldwinkle in *Those Barren Leaves*, studied at full length, in full dress: the sweet, terrible woman in *The Fairy Godmother*: the woman responsible for the death of Young Archimedes: even Mrs Thingummy, waddling from her “Rolls” into the jeweller's shop across the Via Tuornaboni—explanation and excuse for the hermitage built by seven Florentine merchants six hundred years ago in the hills.

His studies of the *Kunstforscher* world vary from the kindly to the vicious; their male counterpart seized, even more savagely, once and for good in Mr Mercaptan with his Crébillon sofa and the “lascivious, witty little flirtations.” (One's personal prejudice admits the women intolerable, but

## SCRUTINIES II

would find Mr Mercaptan rather fun.) In contrast with these there are his maidens—the slightly comic to the exquisite; the adorable girl of the “*nuit blanche*” in *Antic Hay* ; Mary in *Crome Yellow*, her purple pyjamas and hair clipped in a gold bell—“a large, comfortable, unjointed toy . . . a teddy-bear with an angel’s head.” Mary with her dreams about ladders, which were worse than those about falling down wells, standing at dawn on Crome Tower with Ivor Lombard, a peacock sailing down lawnward shrieking, a feather from its tail in her hand.

“ ‘It’s extraordinary to think about sexual selection,’ she said, looking up from her contemplation of the miraculous feather. ‘Extraordinary,’ Ivor echoed; ‘I select you, you select me. What luck.’ He put his arm about her shoulder, looking eastward. . . . The rising sun touched their faces. It was all extremely symbolic, but then, if you chose to think it so, nothing in the world is not symbolic.”

Why the last clause? Damn Mr Huxley! He could quite well have left it at that. After Mary, Irene, supposed to write poetry, who stitched it instead into her exquisite under-linen, and almost as guiltily stood by her lover in spite of Mrs Aldwinkle’s hysterical accusations of infidelity. It is the one idyll in Huxley fulfilled, the boy leaving Mr Sfax, the labour leader, alone in Rome at his conference, and only getting up courage to ask the girl to marry him when his car has touched seventy miles an hour.

In contrast to the dance of boy and girl lovers, there are  
80

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

the wise old men and the men of science: Shearwater in *Antic Hay*, without a mask, a man like a tower; Ilidge in *Point Counterpoint*, Mr Huxley's last, most elaborate, but not most satisfactory novel, where he takes a Wells' character in Lord Tantamount's laboratory assistant, and shows him through the glass of a man to whom knowledge, leisure, fine manners, essential civilisation have always been free. Through a glass—almost every character in Huxley is shown through a crystal slip. One does not see the objection. It is a method—no more—to catch the personality in flight.

His young men are usually variants on one adult male theme: soft-haired, untidy, self-conscious, repressed, observant, and unlucky in love. Negative types. Greenow with all his intelligence, Gambрил, Denis, Calamy, and the man who wanted not passion but "affection and a little quiet sensuality." Most of them in contact, critical, and desiring with the chief danseuse—heroine it is not possible to call them—the most translucent of his masks. Anne, Lucy, the two young women out for a walk in the park in the chill spring dusk, the suffering Cressida, Myra Viveash.

In any consideration of Mr Huxley it is *Antic Hay* which must be taken into chief account. There the method is wholly justified, masque and anti-masque composed together, the formal attributes fused with the flesh beneath; the

## SCRUTINIES II

meditation on society which takes up so much time in other books reduced to action; repose as in Gambril's *nuit blanche*, flight in his endless taxi-ride with Myra Viveash, or in the whirl of the starlings flight round his father's house. In that portrait of an old architect, with his model of London as Wren would have built it, Mr Huxley gives the best account of his most positive preoccupation, the love of order and splendour, wholly human, rational and lovely, the harmonious productions of man's spirit.

It is not often that he will go so far. Like the majority of writers whose business it is to illustrate the human heart he is surer on human weakness than on human strength. Surer than he should be: surer than he has need to be. It is there that one's quarrel with Mr Huxley begins. As a critic his chief preoccupation is with the supreme productions of human imaginative strength; with the music of Bach and Beethoven; the painting of Breughel and Piero della Francesca; the farthest discoveries and speculations of science. Voluntarily or out of some self-distrust, some want of faith, he concentrates as a novelist on irony, the equivocal nature of human wishes, the scandalous stories we tell ourselves to persuade ourselves to do something we would rather not do. While his chief work as a critic is an analysis and appreciation of how superb things get done, his work as an inventor is often monotonous, showing why things cannot be done: are undone: or, if done, produce



## ALDOUS HUXLEY

incalculable and pernicious results. Where there is possibility of achievement he shows it in boys and girls "whose beauty is no stronger than a flower"; the girl who found written outside her bathing hut, "O Clara d'Ellébeuse" on the sand. One remembers in all Mr Huxley's work not more than two figures seen from the viewpoint that gave us Achilles and Odysseus, even Alexander and Ptolemy; that set the type and pace for the hero—Ivor Lombard and Everard Webley. And does he let any enthusiasm he may feel get out of hand? Not for an instant. In the first he presents a lad the earth must fall in love with at first sight, type of the spring-boy, runs him on an ironic lead; and packs him off to devote sympathetic pages to Denis' calf-love for Anne. It may be that the Denises of this life are more interesting than the Ivors. At least, they think more and do less. Mr Huxley is not at ease with male creatures of passion and action and physical beauty; doubts and diffidence are easier seized on than "the delicacies of expression in the types of handsomeness." At any moment these people may do something dangerous: their reasons are pretty sure to be wrong; their abstract curiosity is negligible, and they upset the quiet folk. "Brightness falls from the air," and Mr Huxley is marvellously sensitive to it in the works of nature, and in the works—but strictly in the works—of man. It is tolerable in Myra Viveash, for there it can be labelled sex-appeal, which sent men off after Helen to Troy. Besides,

## SCRUTINIES II

she is an image of suffering and beauty with its heart torn out; she can be counted in as a work of nature. With Everard Webley he has tried again, invented a man with something to do which ought to be done; which he can half approve of; which may yet be done. And every time in *Point Counterpoint* when he appears, one feels that he is giving Mr Huxley pain. As he says of another character, justly, "He uses the big words too easily." It is true. We are all to-day in agony at the big words. The most that we can say is that though it has occasionally been successful to live with them, to live without them is becoming more impossible day by day. He creates Webley, admirably, deprecatingly; and if he lets him fall flat, he lets Ilidge, his adversary, fall flatter. Until finally he has to murder Webley and see that one of his murderers takes his own life. Then dismiss him in a paragraph about the salts which were all which would soon be left of Everard Webley, of his horsemanship, his love of Eleanor, his knowledge of Russian. There is the *impasse*: Aldous Huxley's and our own.

*Point Counterpoint* is Mr Huxley's last, most elaborate novel, repetition with more dancers of his original masque. It has points of resemblance with a full-dress Wells survey, without the ideals, the teaching, preaching, prophesying; without the optimism, the tenderness, the semi-scientific mysticism. And Mr Huxley sketches a rational hope only to kill it. Webley is murdered by two men for two reasons.

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

By Ilidge, a Wells type, seen with pity through those serene and discerning eyes, the common, wretchedly raised man of intellectual power to whom scientific knowledge has been given. He kills through jealousy, idealism, and for vengeance : regrets it. He is the second murderer. The first is Spandrell, enlargement of the red-bearded boy-sadist in *Antic Hay*. He kills for virtuosity; to "find a gesture of his own." This part of the book owes something to Gide's *Faux-Monnayeurs* with its murder for murder's sake. The whole book has been compared with Gide, but Mr Huxley is not dealing with children. For Spandrell his crime is part of Stavrogin's search: he is also a man from Mr Huxley's own world. He keeps his head, while Ilidge loses his and bolts. He waits ; tries to tear an answer out of one of the posthumous quartettes; gives himself up to the dead man's friends, and shoots himself as they come to the door. This is no more sensational than Gide, and as cool and realistic. Only we are not told enough. For Spandrell and Ilidge illustrate a condition which is present everywhere, and counts among its products the revolution in Russia, product of vengeance, idealism, and virtuosity in pain; affirmation of a materialism one suspects to be a provocation to rouse a something once called God to turn and confound it. Spandrell does that: far more of a man than Ilidge, and not only because he has inherited, without effort, the age's gifts. But to explain him, Mr Huxley has hitched him on to the story

## SCRUTINIES II

of Baudelaire, exchanging poetry for boredom, crime, and suicide. As an explanation it is beside the point. Our time is full of young men insufficiently detached from their mothers, unable to live with or without them, or to create the lovely relation of detached love, civilisation's final test. The story of Webley—there is a touch of malice in the name; a cross between an exhibition and a revolver—and his two murderers is sufficient to have built up the book. Yet it has neither more prominence in the book nor less. Nothing in *Point Counterpoint* has more prominence or less. His characters—all friends, all representative of what is most important in our society—move with the same emphasis. While for justification of raw life there is Rampion, a creature who inspires little admiration and less conviction. And yet how unpretentious most of it is and how searching. The quarrel with Mr Huxley may well be resolved in his later work, when he has made up his mind that he dare make up his mind: when that generous spirit and fastidious intellect can admit some discovery that unites them both.

Among his stories one remembers *Fard*, the unbearable tale of the worn-out *femme de chambre*, and the superb indignation implied. Plato and his set expected art to have a moral purpose, "to make men better in their cities." As a matter of fact, it does. After reading that story, how many women could bear to ring a bell and rate a maid for caprice?

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

There Mr Huxley has no hesitations, nor over the "fairy-godmother" taking away with her left hand what she has given with her right. In the last story of his last story-book he reaches a further stage of exasperation. *Nuns at Luncheon* is an intolerable event, made worse by the telling. Mr Huxley is at lunch with a woman journalist, with eyes like a hare and earrings that swing like corpses off miniature gallows. By this variety of *oratio obliqua* the story of the nun, seduced by the beautiful brute she thought her convert and left in the mountain hut without her gold teeth, is told without Mr Huxley's comment. He knows more than enough about the woman who tells it. About the nun he prefers not to speculate. The limit of the unbearable is reached, without comment by the man among all men from whom comment is expected.

The reason of this criticism is to ask why Mr Huxley, identified within his limits as the Perfect Writer, should—save for an occasional idyll between girl and boy—lead his masque and its anti-masque so far, arrest it at a tragic point, and leave the dance unresolved. It does not occur in music or in painting, whatever the theme. And the answer seems to be that Mr Huxley is the perfect mirror of our age, where misery and failure, idiocy and conclusions ludicrous or grotesque, have their perfect excuse and explanation; and where it seems impossible to account for human excellence or achievement any more. Our sins are analysed and

## SCRUTINIES II

explained—explained away—but no man is one whit nearer knowing how the Ninth Symphony was caught out of our noise-crammed silence; nor why, once set down, it has eternally to be repeated to greedy ears, forcing us to assemble by degrees even the gramophone out of chaos for its repetition.

As a novelist Mr Huxley gives no answer. Once only, at the end of his most brilliant *exposé* of human vanities, *Those Barren Leaves*, he admits the question and attempts an answer. The book is long, composed of irony, analysis, idyll, and the faintly obscure situation of the half-wit's proposed marriage. The complication of events leads Calamy, the man of the world turned apologetic seeker after truth, away from Mrs Aldwinkle's villa to a hill refuge in a conscious attempt at escape. And Mr Huxley, who has filled several hundred pages with the subtlest satire on contemporary behaviour, serene and exquisite descriptions of the works of God, wise and enchanting wit, leaves his protagonist, a man he has drawn with interest and some love, alone with the moon and a cypress-tree, hastily and conventionally described, with no more than a pious hope that they will—in fact, that they must—lead him to some unique vision that will save the situation—mankind's and his own and Mr Huxley's. And with that we are left with that.

If only Mr Huxley had given Mr Calamy such a moon

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

and such a cypress-tree as no man has ever had before. As the Perfect Writer those familiar<sup>7</sup> properties should have been a mere challenge to his trained eyes. They are objects agreeable in themselves, the furled, curled umbrella cut by so bright a disk; their history is long, they are one of the original *données* of art. One can almost suspect Mr Huxley of a sneer at his man's simplicity. If he believed in him he might have given him more original properties, or described them uniquely. Finally, one is left exasperated at such comprehension of earthly weakness and human idiocy, with so little to say for human desire and capacity for strength. How does he think it was done—the work of Aristotle and Alexander, of Blake, Mirabeau, and John Donne? The moon and the cypress have played their part, and if the priest meant "My child" when he called the young man "Son of God," the slip had some convincing consequences in recent speculation on the unknown, notorious in the series so lately analysed for us in Dunne's *Experiment with Time*.

Here follows the paradox of Mr Huxley's career, when we leave him as artist and turn to him as critic, usually of the past works and discoveries of man. At once we have another Mr Huxley, serenely at his ease with human life, from its silliest to its greatest and rarest, his judgment on positive qualities unhesitating once he has no invented

## SCRUTINIES II

persons to deal with. Here he convinces us that one would ask nothing better than to explore hell from circle to circle with him for guide: that one would walk easily up and down the connecting floors, sailing if necessary on a monster's back, going out of one's way to meet one of the dead—a scoundrel or a personality—one had not met, but about whom Mr Huxley had heard curious and illuminating things. All the time one would be listening to his mild and penetrating counsels, light as Voltaire's, as searching and more tender; until, at the end of the visit, a miracle would have happened and one would leave hell not particularly thankful to see the stars, because, on looking back, hell would not be there—at worst a mediterranean landscape in hot weather, where people who had earned the wretchedness of lovelessness and boredom were left behind unloved and being bored. The phantasies of torture and terror would have been dissipated for good. And the trick would have been done by one's unassuming guide, cheerful, compassionate, just (if even a little malicious to find Mrs Thingummy surrounded for a stretch of eternity by works of art that were not "amusing," had no social value, and that were not even works of art). On reflection this sounds suspiciously like spiritualism, at most of which one shudders, and which is probably one of the few subjects Mr Huxley has never heard of. Be this as it may, on continuing one's journey one would find the amenities of the earthly Paradise



## ALDOUS HUXLEY

increased, and if it were possible to mount farther towards the Rose of souls, no change in guide would be necessary.

One volume of Mr Huxley's collected essays, *Along the Road*, is chiefly devoted to a loving *exposé* of our dearest æsthetic fashion, the subjection of art, especially the art of painting, to its formal elements and nothing but its formal elements; and the examination of past and present fashions in art. Byron and Goethe neither looked at Giotto nor wanted to. Two roman pillars and half an arch were enough for them, the stimulus for their not inconsiderable art. Nor, in the eighteenth century, did the passage of the Alps arouse "the emotions proper to Switzerland." The "gentle girl and boy" who go to-day to their dancing-place as much for its Matisse as for its easy floor and walls of bright glass brick would, unless their taste was innate, have passed out a century ago before a Landseer—"those more than Christ-like dogs. . . . What lessons they taught us." Nourished from birth, his mother's milk, water, wine, spirits, the Pierian spring, Mr Huxley is one of the few to-day who has the courage to doubt its suitability as a drink at all times for every man. One thing is sure, "on no account should the painter be allowed to touch it"—a conclusion arrived at after an exhibition at Munich, "where the stocks and stones were eloquent in all tongues." The point being—"for success justifies everything"—that none of them were good. So much for Germany's laudable attempt

## SCRUTINIES II

to photograph the artistic remains of every people under the sun.

These observations go deep, applicable to all forms of liberal instruction, for the first time in man's history made possible to all. It goes equally to the heart of the democratic question that an essay in *Proper Studies* treats with such lucid point. Full in the face of human experience, actuated by the most admirable motives of which man is capable—the Encyclopædists it would seem were mystics to a man—we seem to have agreed that all men are equal and should be confided equal powers. Every man who has ever dealt with man knows this to be untrue: every man worth calling a man knows that liberty and fraternity are words that make it worth while to be alive. How many illusions about men had Mirabeau, and for whom did he die? With serene courage, Mr Huxley's critical studies lead him more and more into an examination of this paradox and the insane vistas it calls up. Mr Huxley is aware that the solution lies in the remaking of an aristocracy. As to its nature, or even the possibility of such a re-creation, he is wholly unsure, whose source, stay, and chief preoccupation is with the Pierian spring only, the well at the world's end and in every man's breast: "east of the sun, west of the moon," and laid on now with the plumbing, hot and cold with the bathroom taps.

When one's innocent youth has found the Pierian healthful

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

and has devoted itself—even during the war, even during the peace—to laying it on wherever it did not seem to flow, Mr Huxley's conclusions are not agreeable. It seemed impossible to believe that it could not be the earth's most suitable drink. One wishes to resist what he, first among radical thinkers, has had the courage to say, remembering his limitations, his faithlessness, that stage moon and cypress-tree. But in the hotel where these notes are being written I was stopped in the hall by a clerk of the bureau and made the recipient of some singular confidences. A young man, sad to desperation, he had long been poisoned by a toxic medicine, of whose properties, abused, no one had informed him. His emotional life was a chaos, and he cursed Plato who had raised in him hopes which never came out true. Plato he read in translation, without one idea of his background, his civilisation, the circumstances that conditioned his speculation, his place in human thought. He knew no Greek history: Pierre Louys' pastiches valid to him as Herodotus'. He wanted to commit suicide: attain ideal love: have ideal beauty laid on in the reception bureau of a hotel. Not impossible for a saint; but he also knew that science had explained away sanctity. "Indirectly it is the Pierian spring that is responsible."

Such a man is dangerous only to himself; but Ildige, who would call Plato a middle-class idealist, has more formidable knowledge. And what he knows, he knows well and will

## SCRUTINIES II

use: taught to think himself all men's equal, which works out in practice most men's superior.

Meanwhile Mr Huxley continues his observations on modern æsthetics, and has a great deal of quiet fun at their expense. The old masters were allowed to tell stories, to imagine what Sacred and Profane Love looked like. "Poor devils they knew no better." But we have so set our affection on formal relations, have so far forgotten that there were once Christian mysteries, that we think or at least hope, that Giotto painted solely from interest in the design presented by the breasts and buttocks of his holy beings; that Reubens allowed himself no nonsense about the abundance of human energy and human splendour. And, when it has finally to be admitted that works of enduring, astonishing, disquieting, and adorable merit have been produced, what is the latest theory that our age, and our age only, has produced as explanation? One of our psychologic guides has said, and we seem to accept it, that the style of a painter or an architect—the musician also can be included on a little reflection—is determined by a sublimation of his infantile interest in excreta. This theory has already served to explain religion: now also why art was called its handmaid. Observation has rarely been more pertinent on this subject than Mr Huxley's. He knows what he is talking about. A biologist has called him the scientist's novelist. Yet he is in some sense a victim of that form of thinking he has the

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

courage and the knowledge to expose. The substance of the complaint against him is that he has no alternative explanation to offer, for which we are all waiting. He does not know what it is, this "virtue" under many shapes which comes out of human piggishness and disorder, disillusioned with the tranquil and ignorant acceptance of it, or the grandiose theories which have, up to now, contented us. And he is, one feels, perhaps the one man equipped to explain. It is useless only to blame and satirise the state of our society, so brought up on doubt that the word has lost its meaning—and so bewildered, superstitious, defiant, and afraid as society, except for a few favoured years, has always been. It is Mr Huxley's business to understand it and re-direct it, and he contents himself with satire and occasional indignation. Of impeccable taste, on one side admirably moved by that "virtue" in man and in nature, familiar with the furthest speculations of science, it would seem that the paralysis that comes from supreme knowledge has got hold of him. One step more, one synthesis, and the trick would be done, the contradiction between our time-in, time-out wisdom and our recent information would be harmonised, a re-direction given to the human spirit one sometimes imagines analogous to the knights' move in chess.

In his *Second Aspects of Science* J. W. N. Sullivan discusses mysticism and the mystic, their likeness to the artist in degrees of value, their range from Clark Maxwell to

## SCRUTINIES II

Joanna Southcott; a judgment, coming from a man of science, of extraordinary interest. Mr Huxley is of the same opinion, without apparently arriving at Mr Sullivan's conclusion that a mysticism of Clark Maxwell's quality is likely to be valid by some process not yet understood, and that there may well be in the future a "science of mysticism" to examine its phenomena and determine their quality. One imagines that the test would be an old one, by their fruitfulness, by their enduring evocation of "quality" in beings "according to their kind." In the *Symposium*, when Socrates quotes Diotima, the words that he said he learned from her have had ever since a strange effect on man. What do they mean? Are they true? What is truth? What is the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel about? *Go and catch a falling star? Calling the lapsed soul?* "Literally" true means nothing in their case; but their effect is that no man who has once *heard* them is ever again the same man. A dew has fallen. Mr Huxley, appreciative, says that mysticism has no part in his composition, and in his essay on Wordsworth one sees why the particular form of mountain-reverence enforced on him in boyhood was likely to produce not only scepticism but aridity. There again his timidity comes in to reinforce his doubts and his dislikes; and his scientist's conscience leaves him half-way—one is sometimes tempted to believe—to the middle of nowhere, excusing himself with a certain disingenuousness on the

## ALDOUS HUXLEY

grounds of personal inexperience. And, incidentally, those drops of the Pierian spring passed by Wordsworth from human filter to human filter have had varying results. Thirst-quenching in many cases, we can trace their action to-day, and among people who have never read him, to a great deal of current nonsense about nature and to rows of suburban bungalows copied from the cottage of a Tudor peasant. The Pierian spring, it appears, drawn too far by tap, can get mixed with the drains.

Yet a draught from that spring when it rises is the one that quenches the world's thirst. Liked or not at the first cup, it has only to rise and men drink. Eventually there is no doing without it, and everything from civilisation to the beauty of holiness, the "rapture of the intellect at the approach of the fact" is that spring's result.

Meanwhile, Aldous Huxley appears to be conscious to the point of obsession with the difference between men as they appear daily, as social animals, and what, as a matter of historic fact, they are capable of alone. In his ballets a dancer rarely appears alone; every combination of twos and threes, and sixes and sevens, even the full chorus, as at Lady Tantamount's party—rarely one on an empty stage—or followed by the travelling eye of the spot-light. In spite of his supreme curiosity, he is in danger of becoming monotonous: wit he will display, and fun and physical loveliness: ingenious argument: the "giver-away," comic

## SCRUTINIES II

to monstrous, of the self-satisfied. Every variety of human vanity, pretension, helplessness, intelligence, suffering—dumb or conscious—frustration, and indignation—these compose his masque, and the dancers are civilised and handsome: the barbarians and the ill-raised rarely intrude.

Yet he knows, as few men have ever known, that "virtue" exists; and by some subtle re-arrangement, neither new dress nor *décor* nor change in choreography, but by some representation of the familiar, of which he alone is capable, he might give such characters as Webley and Ivor Lombard, even Rampion, their final significance. His obsession with human bondage once in proportion, he might realise that he has other capacities than to make portraits, however lively, however searching, of contemporary futility and despair. Then he might draw for us such figures out of our chaos as might begin to harmonise it, present us with persons imagined on the scale of those who are the subjects of his critical survey—Chaucer, Breughel, Sir Christopher Wren. About these he has no indecision, nor about Piero della Francesca, who painted "the greatest picture in the world," where not Christ but the spirit of man steps down out of the tomb, ready to start out again across the world.

MARY BUTTS.



Four

JAMES JOYCE

Four

JAMES JOYCE

by

JACK LINDSAY

To understand the vast inflation of personality that has occurred between the thin romantical escape of *Chamber Music* and the gyres of rebellious secrecy in *Work in Progress*, it would be as well to make first a slight general analysis of creative psychology.

Borrowing Nietzsche's symbols for the twin elements of the creative urge—Will to Power and Eternal Recurrence, *i.e.* creativity in terms of the material it must subdue, and creativity free, self-affirmatively concrete—I should say that the creator must be for ever torn between these two modes of his unified self. Like Wagner, he may gigantically exploit his Will to Power, but while he keeps vitally in touch with his peculiar Eternity (the concrete image, the unique individual rhythm), he is yet being true to his central

## JAMES JOYCE

intention. Or like Beethoven, he may concentrate almost purely on the liberation of the Image of will and yet subjugate actuality as the merest of despised afterthoughts. These two extreme cases prove how far the creator may sway to one side of this dual desire without maiming himself—though *Parsifal* is there to show how he may lose his balance and submit buffoonishly to the terms externality lays upon his conquest; and the Beethoven late chamber music to show how perilously magical the desire to inhabit a world of pure imagery may become, though in them potency never degenerates into incantation.

I make this analysis because I believe that Joyce is a striking example of a man of genuinely profound creative potentialities, who has limited himself at every point to exigencies of the material he sought to subdue. Because of a division at the root of his poetic energies he has always been too conscious of the audience, whether in hostile loneliness or deliberate antagonism. He has never created purely from desire; always the vanity of one-man-against-the-world has coloured his intuition, although in Bloom he made one great and praiseworthy effort to break up this abstract preconception of bitterness.

This basic weakness, with all its compensatory self-deceptions, is seen flagrantly in the meagre harmonies of his verse, in which he seeks to put himself against the unadulterated twilight of local bards by a discreet admixture

## SCRUTINIES II

of Verlainish nuance and English sharper constructions. If *Chamber Music* were the work of a boy, it would not be fair to press the point of its etiolated emotional cadence; but Joyce published the book when he was past the middle of the twenties, and has sanctioned its reprint—even aggravated the offence with *Pomes Pennyeach*.

It is recorded that he used to go about Dublin at the time of this versifying, claiming that he echoed the Elizabethan musicks—a vanity altogether without foundation. A much more bastard and feeble note sounds in these stanzas:

“ Sing about the long deep sleep  
Of lovers that are dead, and how  
In the grave all love shall sleep:  
Love is aweary now.”

This desire to belong to something deeper than a mere local group, to have his expression as wide in interest as the language and the whole modern consciousness, was worthy enough; and it had its growth from a decidedly undemocratic distaste for all mob movements. In 1901 his first extant work, *The Day of the Rabblement*, had enunciated this position. This desire for a greater extension of power than Celticism could afford, this contempt for moving with the democratic mob, was indeed worthy. But side by side with its virtues of energy are to be noted its weaknesses, which have ended in becoming destructive, and have in fact landed him in the very things he sought to avoid. These

## JAMES JOYCE

weaknesses are, firstly, an abstract self-aggrandisement manifest in his comparing his verses with the Elizabethans', and, secondly, an abstract poetisation which succeeds only in making his aloofness an expression of uncertainty and clique-mongering instead of passionate purpose.

No doubt Joyce experienced a difficult and interminable puberty and knew very wretchedly social, moral, and religious repression in his early and tender years. We are surely not prying too far into his personal intimacies in deducing this from his continued theme of thwarted lives. A Catholic training no doubt had bitten deeply into his sensitive hide. We are forced to return to this probing of Joyce's own experience because so much of his work gives the conviction that he has not transcended his experience, that its hurt has not been æsthetically healed, but has remained gangrenous, despite all the skill with which he strives to remove it into objectivity. We are forced back to Joyce's personal adolescence because Joyce has stayed there himself. The problems of adolescence remain unsolved in his work, though most cunningly hidden by (a) Flaubertian bitterness: *realism*; (b) infinite cubes of time: *Ulysses*; (c) infinite algebra of gossip: *Work in Progress*.

But, it may be objected, this analysis is irrelevant—what do the personal limitations of Joyce matter if his work is technically exciting and adequate? I do not see how this

## SCRUTINIES II

plea can stand. If a technique is adequate, it is adequate to something. That something is the attained and approximate unity of the individual. And since that individual is part of life, and must go to life for the material by means of which he seeks to approximate towards an inner harmony, we also must go to life for our material if we wish to analyse the measure of his æsthetic success. Otherwise we are damned to mere measuring of one part of a work against another part—pure craft-analysis, in which we must commend more highly the man who sets out to compose an adequate advertisement for boots, and does so, than the author of *King Lear*. If Joyce's difficult puberty stands in the way of his complete realisation of the characters he seeks to project, if it conditions the direction of his technique, it cannot be ignored.

Let us take Shakespeare as the perfected norm of the self-conscious artist. No doubt we can point to weakenings within the texture of his consciousness, but in the final analysis we have no one else to take as representing a fixed point of self-knowledge amid the relativity of images. The conflicts Shakespeare posits are the conflicts of an adult, one whose consciousness has surmounted all the immediate obstacles of fear and shame and the lusts of the will to power. That the war between these elements continues does not matter—that is, of course, inevitable. But this war is the war of Eternal Recurrence: the joyous search of self

## JAMES JOYCE

through infinite agonies and selfs for the principle of its own continuance.

If a creator should halt before the first barriers of fear and shame, and if he should spend the rest of his life in sanctifying disgust, in pretending by the legerdmain of acquired style and perception that he has achieved the autonomy of self-knowledge—that surely is a primary factor in his expression which we must fully understand if we are to understand anything about him at all.

It is of no consequence that Joyce finds himself driven back to his adolescence for his material; but it is deeply important that he is still the dupe of the conflicts which then disrupted him:

‘ I would in that sweet bosom be  
    (Oh, sweet it is and fair it is!)  
Where no rude wind might visit me.  
    Because of sad austerities  
I would in that sweet bosom be . . . ”

he cries in his early verse. And this weak cry of suffering, of a sensitive, lonely, high, unconsortable one quivering on the thorns of a crude world, has always been the central spring of his inspiration. It is not, I repeat, wrong that he should feel this antinomy, which exists for every self-conscious individual. No man with a conscience and a sensibility worth tuppence can look out upon the world of Christian industrialism without loathing and hatred, and

## SCRUTINIES II

fear and pain in his bowels. No such man can look out on the contented maggots of its corpse without disgust and a knowledge of his own lonely superiority. But if he becomes the dupe of his perception, if he allows this ugliness to dominate him, and so to limit him to its antinomy, he is bringing a chasm into the very heart of his activities, he is seeing himself as an abstract poetical image hurt by the vast ineluctable machinery of ugliness, not as a concrete poetic individual achieving the experience of his instincts despite the malformation of circumstance.

Thus Shakespeare in Falstaff and Hamlet defines two antithetical types—the easily sensual man and the man whose moral, sensual, and intellectual elements are jarred at every point by actuality; but in neither case is the definition obtained by a maiming or limitation of self. Beyond these two images (despite, or rather because of, their perfect vital objectification) we realise the entity of Shakespeare, the joyous continuance of his energy, the unity of his consciousness.

But Joyce can only find moral meaning and æsthetic purpose in the universe by contrasting Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, the intellectual and the sensual man. That he makes an effort to bring them together by the Telemachean fable is of no significance. Falstaff and Hamlet meet in the equal concrete vitality of their conception. Stephen and Bloom meet allegorically: they are



## JAMES JOYCE

merely disparate halves which are told to meet. And so, met, they constitute no reality; they are more than ever merely two disparate halves looking at one another across infinitely merging cubes of time and the isolation of words. Bloom sees his dead son Rudy in the prostrate Stephen; and the latter *is* his son in the sense that vague poetico-intellectualism is limited to, and so created by, the simple instinctive world which it is unable to encompass. But I do not think Joyce meant this by his fable, if indeed he meant anything at all.

Not that Joyce can be dismissed by the demonstration of this schism at the heart of his experience and of his expression. Still, it does dispose of him as a first-class creator. On the second-rate level he remains a most interesting, ingenious, and suggestive writer, one of the greatest of comprehensive innovators. His work is synthetic without being able to synthesise.

*Ulysses* achieves what it sets out to do: a definition of twenty-four hours' living by two men. As such it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of realism. It takes a natural division as emblem of a completed life, and proceeds to relate within this division the whole paraphernalia of experience, physical, intellectual, emotional, and neural. A funeral, a birth, a sexual episode, drunkenness, a brothel visit, and a fight are shown against a wild kaleidoscope of social fact, and all the itchings and excretings of bodies across that passage of

## SCRUTINIES II

time—the whole rounded with the fluid luxuriance of a woman's tousled musing: an excellent device which does almost give a benediction of utterly trivial unselfconsciousness and complacent sensuality to the mad, suffering day.

The prime achievement of this book is the webs of temporal palpability that it creates. This, which critics like Wyndham Lewis have attacked for all the wrong reasons, gives the book an historical place in literature, from which it is not likely to be removed—if only for the simple reason that its displacer would have to possess an even more colossal energy and patience, and an even vaster memory for futile minutiae; he would have to ransack even more encyclopædias in an effort to string together a wider nexus of possibly relevant facts.

Can this book be said to add to our psychological sense? Certainly it does so, in that it brings together a mass of hitherto unrelated elements of experience—all the elements of dispersed attention, the criss-crossing of physical stimuli and intellectual processes, the obscure symbolisms of coincidence, the frittering day-dreams, the pathological odds and ends that strew the most normal consciousness, though we pretend they do not exist until they reach a morbid dominance and are brought to light in the clinics, the thin oblique fantasies with which we glance among objects, the incessant, broken, associative activities of memory. The book therefore undeniably helps us to an awareness of all the surface elements

## JAMES JOYCE

of experience. But with equal certainty we can deny that it deepens our psychological or spiritual perception. Of imaginative knowledge it has nothing. Indeed, its very method, from which all its virtues proceed, makes this impossible. The only place where it seeks concentrated gesture is where the image of Stephen's dead mother attacks the whoring son and strikes him into abject terror. But this episode is altogether ineffective, though Joyce has had in it the admirable desire of making the word *shite* the climax of a tragic tension. The fact remains that we cannot take Stephen's obsession with his mother seriously. It bores us. He is no Ædipus, or Orestes, or Hamlet. He is an abstract dummy of the author's vanity and self-pity, from behind which Joyce hides from full æsthetic realisation of his own powers, not an active self-contained image.

Bloom is the triumph of the book. Not because he is a great character-projection, but because of the æsthetic interest of the method by which his huge form is articulated. Beside Dedalus, indeed, he does possess character; but when we have finished the book it is as though we ourselves, not Bloom, had actually experienced this fatiguing day. What do we remember of Bloom that is not rather in the form of an amusing anecdote or jest the day has thrown up to *us*? Bloom has undoubtedly been our companion, at least part of the time; but Bloom the anecdotal element and Bloom the Ulysses of the modern world of sense remain

## SCRUTINIES II

separate. The vital part of the book is the mass of universal *sensations* we have experienced as Bloom—defæcation, micturition, eating, drinking, masturbation, tiredness, etc.

Every now and then Joyce remembers to add some realistic character-touch to Bloom, but for the most part he tends to be obliterated among the impersonal huddle of abstract impressions or to diffuse himself into a universal emblem of sense, with a thin streak of non-Bloomish, pure-Joyce-Dedalus poeticality wreathing across his crumbling bulk.

If Joyce had built the work purely on his extraordinary virtuosity and his power to transcribe the essence of sensations, it seems to me that he would have vindicated the claim of his admirers that he equals Rabelais.<sup>1</sup> As things are, with the dullness of many patches where Joyce loses interest in his own association-method and tries to fill in with catalogue or fireworks, and with the feeble Dedalus conception bringing a false drama and a sterile antithesis into the structure, the claim is merely ridiculous, and tempts one to underestimate the real though lesser achievement of the work.

An admirer has seen in both Joyce and Rabelais the priest tipping out the rubbish of the confessional. But the atom

<sup>1</sup> It might seem that this is exactly what he is doing in *Work in Progress*; but although there much that is thin in the method of *Ulysses* disappears, the new freedom is not compensated for by an added intellectual coherence.

## JAMES JOYCE

of truth in this only makes it less tenable in its full implications. Rabelais is the human spirit realising after a long darkness that nothing matters but its own joyous experience of earth: a tipsy mockery of fear by means of all of the insignia of fecundity; a disdain of the whole social and intellectual system of man, from a core of intuitional knowledge which is yet fascinated by all the elements it disdains, delightedly returning into its own secret consolation.

Joyce, on the other hand, submits altogether to the repression symbolised for him in the Church and the Mother. Stephen can only enter a brothel by making it a blasphemy of the *Introito*, his drama can only be enacted by having him wilt before a repressive image of incest made horrible by crabs of cancer. Rabelais expresses the release of the whole body from a servitude of terror. Joyce defines nothing in the end but an agony of the nerves flogged into a release of exhaustion. Rabelais is blasphemous and obscene because only thus can he express the enormous laughter quaking in his bowels: a glorification of the filthy earth, because, being filthy, it can yet be an image of derisive happiness, and so all the happier: putridity and excrement as the breeding-ground of life. This flesh that I adore is carrion, my darling—ah, then, how I delight in the embraces of the worm: let us see how strong my love is, how horrible the image of disgust it can sustain and conquer. . . . In Rabelais the priest, receptacle of all the muttering discontents

## SCRUTINIES II

of bewildered and terrified bodies, deepens out beyond Christianity into ecstasy of acceptance.

Joyce employs blasphemy and obscenity, first of all simply because they are there and so recorded by his objective vision; but secondly, and more importantly, because he is revolted by the necessities of life and enjoys the laceration and smirching of his own delicacy. He inverts the Rabelaisian proposition. In him the priest shrinks sullied back into himself, also away from Christianity, but in hate, still damned to the filth of the confessional, damned to the infernal repetition of the body's needs.

Here, however, we must make a dual judgment. Although I think the obscenities in Joyce are based more in moral disgust than in æsthetic acceptance, they have yet had a great fighting value for the post-war generation; and, since police action has been invoked, we have no resource but to give them our heartiest applause. Besides, a number of them are aptly humorous, and Joyce's capacity for three-dimensional plausibility was never better employed than in the Gertie and Marion passages, nor his deliberate pathological fantasies better loosed than in Bloom's experience in the brothel. And it is in these portions that most obscenities are to be found.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We may note the moral naïves like Robert Graves (*Lars Porsena*), who argue whether *Ulysses* is obscene or not. *Obscene* is merely a police term and has nothing to do with morality. The morality or immorality of a work can only be determined by plumbing its central

## JAMES JOYCE

In the Gertie and Marion sections it will be noticed that he employs a much more closely knit association-method than usual, putting the action completely inside the head of a woman.<sup>1</sup> And in the third instance he carries the associations away from the dull routine of street and the half-stunned movement of affairs into the rapid and irresponsible dream-images of drunkenness. Another case where the method is used very successfully is in the bar scene while the horses trot past, where the tangle of sensations is curiously caught. We are driven to the conclusion, then, that the method, accepted holus-bolus, has no creative validity,

intention and deciding whether it makes for greater power and harmony, or less. *Ulysses* is a difficult work to evaluate, for while it does heighten power, it attacks harmony (the poetic integration of experience). Probably, not being a liberated form, its influence for good or ill will be determined by the use other creators can make of its suggestions; but in any case the obscenities have no bearing on the question.

<sup>1</sup> Various approximations had been made to this use, which is at base as old as humour itself: Trimalchio or Dame Quickly. But Flora in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* is noteworthy as the precursor of Marion Bloom; the only thing that Joyce has done is to extend the method vastly and to make the lecheries explicit. Here is Flora: "In Italy, is she really? with the grapes and figs growing everywhere and lava necklaces and bracelets, too; that land of poetry with burning mountains picturesque beyond belief, though, if the organ-boys come away from the neighbourhood not to be scorched, nobody can wonder, being so young and bringing their white mice with them: most humane; and is she really in that favoured land with nothing but blue about her, and dying gladiators and Belvederas, though Mr F. himself did not believe, for his objection, when in spirits, was that the images could not be true, there being no medium between expensive quantities of linen badly got up and none whatever, which certainly does not seem probable, though perhaps in consequence of the extremes of rich and poor which may account for it."

## SCRUTINIES II

but can be very valuable when isolated, either subjectively in a simple character or objectively in pure disintegration of neural stimuli. In the mass it is only valuable finally for an exposition of the futility and tediousness of the method known as Realism.

But it does leave manifold suggestions. It implies an extreme discipline of sensory analysis; it hints at the possibility of a new subjective-objective amalgam which will elude the artificialities of the old transitions in time and space. By accepting remorselessly the passage of time as *real*, and showing that the resultant possible disintegration of experience is infinite, it forces us to find new volatilities of the image if we are to escape this leaden oppression. It is here that we see Joyce with Proust as the mazy culmination of a deadening method which deliberately disintegrates itself in the hopes of thereby finding revitalisation. It does, indeed, find the excitement it craves; but this vitality is essentially maggotty. However, the corpse is first-class manure; and genuinely new poetries may spring up from its fertilisation if we sow intelligently. Perhaps the adolescent division of Joyce's spirit may become, historically, the incentive to a profounder harmony than has yet been known.

If further proof of Joyce's limitation was needed, the play *Exiles* affords it. It is typical of all post-Ibsenish plays: an intellectual effort to define sincerity of emotion, where the



## JAMES JOYCE

whole emotional tangle is actually created *by* the abstract sincerity. It is Russian, in the worst sense of that belaboured word: it sets out to solve a moral riddle in terms which necessitate the continuance of the riddle; it has that perversity of moral earnestness which is at root a masochistic impulse to draw energy from pain. Keep splitting the self up to be sure that it is alive: keep probing with the blade of abstract honesty so that the more the sufferer trembles on a moral solution, the more the next wince will scatter his nerves back to their original exasperation. For the abstract intellectual instrument can never solve a problem of living, however necessary it is to that solution. Only an act of faith can establish harmony, for harmony is faith: the dynamic mingling of two antitheses. Love, abstractly sincere, must express itself as hate. Joyce, indeed, in the play, does make the woman try weakly to express love, but only because he is comfortably secure in the perverse sensitivities of the man, his irremediable suffering over something that doesn't exist. They are very degrading, these works so pretentiously sincere, so smug underneath.

And this brings me back to the core of vanity which is behind all these divisions. Having made a frank exposure of its fear of the active world in *Chamber Music*, Joyce went on into Flaubertism, the apparent opposite of his pretty loneliness, but in fact its natural corollary. Flaubertism is the most annoying form of artistic vanity, because it apes

## SCRUTINIES II

so irrefutably the antithetically based hardness typified so nobly by Beethoven. “*Become hard, O my brothers!*” cries Nietzsche; and Flaubert is the vulgar parody which life in its prompt irony bestows on consciousness. The irritably omnipotent Jehovah as against the divinely cruel Dionysius. Having failed in his effort to reject the world by casting images of lonely beauty among its barbarians, Joyce decides to have his revenge more subtly: to reject it by means of cold, meticulous statement of ugliness. Jehovah’s superiority: impersonal Realism. The Lord thy God is a jealous God. Joyce miserably, gleefully, starts off each of his characters on his tiny voyage of hope, to take him, strand by strand, in the web of the world’s implacable imbecility.

“His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe, and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”

The style betrays the frustrated poet beneath the frustrating *deus ex machina*. Flaubertism seeks to gain a conviction of power by an infinitely spread-out conception of the creator as an omniscient and incorruptible magistrate, but the case against life has already been decided behind the scenes. For the dominant emotion is self-pity, which it hides under a pretence of fine cruelty, of ruthlessly precise perceptions. It expresses its hidden commiseration for self by condemning the rest of the world for conspiring to hurt its tenderness. This is not the true facing of the significance of suffering

## JAMES JOYCE

and evil, because there is this continuous falsification going on. Self-pity never ceases to bribe the judge; and the bitter impersonal mask is sought as security against detection. What is expressed is not the fact of courage, but the need of evading fear. To be brave is to be aware simultaneously of self-pity and fear, of desire, of the preposterous nature of desire in the universe of necessity, of the lack of any meaning in the gesture you are about to make, and of the absolute freedom of desire. Given these ingredients, dramatic poetry may result.

Where *Exiles* shows the moral perversity of the man who perceives sufficient emotional truth to tantalise his nerves with the impossibility of its absorption, *Dubliners* shows the calculated bitterness of a man whose perception of existence is sufficiently true to prick his sensibility into an awareness of its hopeless alienation from beauty.

Pure realism and pure romanticism are equally cowardly. The self is neither a mask nor a pair of wings, though it needs both properties in the farce and tragedy of its existence if it is to act its part fully. Joyce began as a pair of seraphico-insipid wings. He then tried to take plaster casts of his own degraded existence (degraded because it was so sensitive that it couldn't bear other people being degraded). These efforts forced him back on his own adolescence (already, in *Dubliners*, the child-frustration keeps appearing as theme), and he rediscovered the hell of repression through which

## SCRUTINIES II

he had travelled, reinforcing it now with maturely jangled nerves and all the pathological resources of his sophistication. Hell: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He then tried to amalgamate Realism, Hell, and Poetry in *Ulysses*, and, failing, yet wrote a great work. Unflinching he began again with a fresh shuffling, dropping the realistic construction and seeking to interpenetrate the dismembered sensory material with the pure fluidity of poetic rhythm. This was no doubt a serious effort towards a kind of integration; but, if so, it fails badly, for Joyce has not sufficiently sinewy a poetic faculty to carry his undoubted power over the sensory image, without the temporal construction of succession.

His increasing literary adroitness strives to dissolve this internal disharmony and flaccidity into a continuous stream of verbal vortices; but behind the stream persists this unequal balance of lyricism and perception, uneasily twining across one another in an endless anagram disguised as the Birth of Language, the Rhythmic Flow of the Soul (or the Liffey), the slow, bubbling upgrowth of Earthgods, the Evolutionary Progress of the Soul, a hidden Libel on all his friends, the Esperanto of the Selfconscious Artist (the Clique now having inherited the Earth, as was promised), a Sinn-Fein attempt to destroy the English tongue, a Masculine Saga of the Elements or Apotheosis of Feminine Scandal, a Timeless Dimension of Language, Life resolved back to its Word-roots, or the Word speeded up to the precipitancy

## JAMES JOYCE

of Life, the Word exploding into its neural-emotive-psychological constituents, or the World conceived as an activity of Pure Language, the Primitive Forces of Words, and their ultimate Complexity.

In this sense Joyce is the Hegelian god of modernity, seeking to fill time and space with the infinitely extending word, as Gertrude Stein is the Buddhist, seeking to empty the word even of *cliché*.<sup>1</sup> Such efforts may constitute something in value to those who prosecute them, just as no doubt the Buddhist wheel and the Christian theophagy mean something to those who drone or quaff: but they are irrelevant to literature. The study of a person who can write so sillily as Stein might be *material* for literature, say, a satirical novel—just as the devotees might be—but that is the only literary relation.

In the same way Joyce has now passed over the bounds of literature and become an exhibit rather than a revealer. Still, his verbal virtuosity, the wit that every now and then bombinates behind the tail of his allusive infinity, the verve

<sup>1</sup> "What Miss Stein says derives its meaning from nothing external to her writing, but from her realisation of what she presents in, rather than merely suggests by, her words" (Ralph Church, *transition* 14): *i.e.* her content is Nothing, varied prosodically, just as any two Buddhists become Nirvāna would at least represent this variation in Nothing, that what would be there if there wasn't Nothing would be (slightly) differing Somethings. This definition of Ralph Church's is, though nonsense, a true statement, which cannot be said of L. Riding's attempt to see Stein as the exponent of the "barbarian" word—an equal psychological and æsthetic fallacy.

## SCRUTINIES II

of babble (what the Esperantists call the Flow of Life) in *Work in Progress*, redeem it from utter contempt. Indeed, the verbal fantasy, with its onomatopœic wit and kaleidoscopic furore, has the elements of a Freudian euphemism, which might well help the language to re-achieve poetic prodigality and daring, if it were not for the wilfully childish element which prevents the work from finding some essential diaphragm between structure and material. It is rather with a feeling of sorrowful pity that one arises from its dashing, rudderless scintillations, its mingling force and puerility. One is in at the death of a very fine faculty, riotously and wilfully run to seed. Even so, much of the seed may be worth gathering by those who know how to cultivate their garden.

It is all so childishly wilful—vanity again. But where, as Flaubertian, Joyce was at least posturing to himself, playing tinpot Jehovah to his own little squalid sensitivities, his own backyard of decaying poetry—here he has given up acting masochist to the whips of Dublin-dirtied senses, he has set up the Clique as Jehovah, and though he may compensate himself for all he feels of his loss of dignity by a greater personal arrogance, the fact remains that he has surrendered finally his responsibility as creator.

Too much water has flowed under Liffey bridge since *Chamber Music* was emptied into it; Joyce has added too many realistic methods to his repertoire, too much psycho-

## JAMES JOYCE

logical hocus-pocus, for him to return to his naïve Celticism. Still, in his latest work he comes the full circle. Despite its minutiae of sensory analysis and realistic bric-à-brac, this work shows him as the Celtic rhapsodist, gushing on in fervid abstraction, a Swinburne of post-Freudians. The incessant splitting-up of language, the complicated knots tied to no particular purpose, which are the method of its wit, betray the same motive weakness: the sense of power manifesting itself in the wrong quarter—here, mockingly and drunkenly hiding in its own convolutions, fingers to nose. The style has a fevered excitation, a paranoiac getting-one's-own-back on an intractable and hostile world. Another evasion by the high unconsortable one. At last he is alone, hiding behind a veil as stupidly complicated as life, as abstractly twirling as the details in the Book of Kells, emitting the whole secret organisation of his fear. He is therefore primarily an exhibit, because the creative will has submitted as far as it can to the minute vortices of exasperation with which it responds unwillingly to life. And so, though shallowly understood, this work is described as timeless in contradistinction to *Ulysses*; it is truly even more under the domination of time. For it does not conquer time by achieving a concentrated unity of relations, but by diving beneath all temporal construction into the terror and arrogance of dreams. It has all the cunning of dreams or of a thoroughly primitive organism.

## SCRUTINIES II

To seek to write in this style is to experience fumes of drunkenness in the head, a giddy explosive elation of power and of complex secrecy, not a compulsive ardour. In this again it is curiously allied to Swinburne's verse (scald-like has been chosen to describe both writers). In fact, it is adult Swinburne, a conception I would have denied could exist, if Joyce's elaborate tumult were not there to give my incredulity the lie. Joyce has escaped the Dedalus-Bloom antinomy, but at the cost of all creative responsibility. He has escaped the incest-complex, but by babbling back into the womb of poetries.

JACK LINDSAY.



THE LATER PERIOD OF  
D. H. LAWRENCE

Five

## THE LATER PERIOD OF D. H. LAWRENCE

*by*

PETER QUENNELL

“DANS le créateur,” writes M. Jean Cocteau in *Le Coq et l’Arlequin*, “il y a nécessairement un homme et une femme, et la femme est presque toujours insupportable.” M. Cocteau is writing, no doubt, of the direction of the artist’s life and of the part played in it by these conflicting principles. His aphorism might have been extended, I think, to cover larger questions of the creator’s æsthetic development. Here, too, a male and a female genius are at war. They control different shares of a writer’s imagination, a different vocabulary perhaps, different verbs even, and different tenses. Either the masculine principle is in the zenith, shedding down its hard, argumentative, but uncoloured and

## THE LATER PERIOD

unqualified ray; or, better, it shines softened and refracted through the milky, allusive vapours summoned up from the earth by the potency of its female counterpart. Or, again (as nowadays more often happens), the influence of the female genius grows stronger, its curtains of interposing cloud gain substance and opacity, and the male principle, gradually losing brightness and distinction, is at length almost entirely blotted out. We still experience a sensation of its propinquity; its diffused glow still reaches us here and there; but the *form* of novel, poem, or history has long since passed beyond its control. Mr D. H. Lawrence's later novels, *Kangaroo*, *The Plumed Serpent*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, retain a kind of form, it may be; and perplexedly Mr Lawrence's guiding star still blinks against the overwhelming exhalations of his worser and female self. Presently, we believe, Mr Lawrence's star may emerge; and we are strengthened in this conviction by the appearance of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the *ne plus ultra* of sentimental female anarchism, a horrid sum-total of previous enthusiasms and prejudices. If it is for no other reason, a critic may console himself that Mr Lawrence's once enchanting and compulsive talent should have come so near to a perpetual and complete eclipse!

Then, pursuing the line of inquiry suggested above, a reader might regard it as something more than a succession of coincidences in the choice of themes which has given

## SCRUTINIES II

Mr Lawrence's later novels and stories a *feminist* bias, unmistakable and very often grotesquely pronounced. Take, at random, *The Woman who Rode Away*, *St Mawr*, and the egregious *Lady Chatterley*. The gist of the subject-matter is identical. We are shown a woman, mature, disillusioned, and bitterly impatient of male society. We watch the process of emancipation. She casts off her fetters under our astonished eyes. She renounces the "life of the spirit" (a phrase for Mr D. H. Lawrence synonymous with the most rancorous terms of abuse) and recommences, after adventures and vicissitudes, the triumphant life of the womb—all this to the accompaniment of corybantic drummings and with the devoted assistance of some small, dark, and as far as possible *anonymous* Indian, coal-miner, or ostler, a mere dependency, a mere parasitic attachment of the big, blonde female creature, like the tiny parasitic male which angler-fishes carry on their heads. What, for example, considered from an external point of view, is Lady Chatterley's lover except the figure of a man so whittled down by female artifice that there remains nothing, or almost nothing, about him which can conceivably interrupt or dilute a woman's pleasure? We are sorry that Mr Lawrence did not assign his hero one of those colloquial combinations of Christian names that are popularly used to designate the modern avatars of the god whose painted emblem presided over the Athenian comic festivals. This mistake, it is true,

## THE LATER PERIOD

protagonists do their best to rectify. They speak of each other impersonally; they are "Lady Jane" and "John Thomas" *tout court*. They even proceed to affecting little rites of fetish-worship, solemnised by the laying-on of ceremonial flower-wreaths and by reverent obeisance. An upper-middle-class revolutionary doxy surrounding her godhead with an abundance of minor pathetic ministrations! "How proud he is!" she exclaims; and, "pinnacled in the intense inane" of their love commerce, proud her deity is indeed, proud and singleminded. For though Mr Lawrence allows his gamekeeper certain attributes of humanity—Mellors is a sort of socialist, has read books, boasts a few shadowily subversive opinions—symbol he remains, a cylindrical, monolithic symbol stabbing truculently up into the void. He is, in short, the personified pleasure-instrument; but he is also, at moments, a personification of the extraordinarily vindictive and nasty-tempered *under-dog*, despising the class among which he has been born, keenly resenting the existence of a class towards which he aspires, who comes bounding up the easy incline of the English social system as often as its predestined mistress, the disappointed, fretful, mind-hating daughter of middle-class solidity, opens her bedroom door and whistles. Then, inside her room, coaxed on to the coverlet, assured that: "No, he is not to be self-conscious," she likes his muddy footmarks across her rugs; that she positively admires the

## SCRUTINIES II

rather clumsy, half-jaunty, half-ingratiating swish-swish of his flaggy tail-fringe, 'Mellors is still suspicious, still very much on his guard. He distrusts her caresses. . . . Good Dog, Good Dog, Nice Old Doggie! He ventures a snarl now and again; he resorts to a peculiarly exasperating self-protective trick, acquired no doubt during his under-dog peregrinations, of abruptly lapsing into the impenetrability of North Country dialect, a habit that distresses Lady Chatterley, annoys her elder sister, and lashes to a frenzy Mr Lawrence's naturally less tolerant critic.

And so the triumph of the under-dog proceeds, the yard-dog "in my lady's chamber," sometimes on the bed, sometimes under it, prudently out of sight. As a corollary, we are privileged to witness the downfall of Lady Chatterley's husband, his friends and interests, and the odious way of life which he represents. He is a mind (poor man, what could he be else, paralysed from the hips downwards?) sitting up in bed and tap-tap-tapping on his typewriter. Yes, he writes, manufactures stories, reads a good deal—reads Proust. He talks and talks; he "lacks warmth," Lady Chatterley divines. When he moves, it is rationally, not instinctively; when he feels, his emotion is more often than not centred in the head. His bowels and stomach have been relegated to the supervision of his digestive and eliminatory processes; the sceptre has passed from them. He degenerates; that is to say, his intelligence begins to

## THE LATER PERIOD

get the upper hand. He is beginning to see through Lady Chatterley, learning to do without her always rather grudging and ungracious attentions. Mellors has won; the under-dog has bitten, bitten as hard as he knows, and his master has not returned the offence; a climax which Mr Lawrence finds so invigorating that this usually shrewd and hard-headed observer of human affairs commits himself to several pages of a rare and penetrating absurdity. Lady Chatterley's father, a cultured and pleasure-loving Academician, has been "brought round" and finally reconciled to the proposed match. He and Mellors meet. They sniff, dubiously at first, investigate, and sniff again. Yes, there can be no doubt of it, they are dogs of the same litter. "Did Mr Mellors *find the going good?*" the courtly old Œdipus inquires. Heartily Mellors assures him that he did; and the barrier separating them has henceforward entirely disappeared!

Impatient, as I have suggested, of the class among which he had been brought up, ineradicably suspicious of the classes dimly envisaged looming above him, Mr Lawrence's hero cannot be expected to stand alone. It must be inferred—O last vulgarity!—that Mellors is "one of Nature's gentlemen." And this under-dog aristocracy, into which Mellors and the hero of *Aaron's Rod* eventually find their way, includes, beside a mere handful of white men (generally derived from the North; is it the proximity of the Dukeries which gives the Northern colliery districts their apparent

## SCRUTINIES II

monopoly of Nature's gentlemen ?), a vast nameless horde of red and brown men, Mexican Indians, and others, which would, I suppose, have been enlarged by Mr Lawrence as his acquaintance with the subject-races became more extensive. No blame, of course, can attach to Mr Lawrence's sympathy with primitive man, nor, for that matter, to any sympathy or antipathy a novelist takes up, provided that he uses it legitimately, is moderately self-critical, does not exploit or sentimentally abuse it. But abuse his preoccupations—alas, Mr Lawrence consistently and flagrantly does! And, although the Romanticist legend of an inscrutable and mysterious East seems to have received a final interment, here is Mr Lawrence industriously at work upon the fable of an inscrutable and mysterious West—Arizona and Mexico, home of the red-man, seat of Quetzalcoatl . . . Aztec cruelty . . . obsidian knives . . . towering cactus-spikes . . . blood. But when Mr Lawrence's Western travel-essays are not the mere stringing together of picturesque impressions, beautiful sometimes of their kind, but as grossly sentimentalised as the impressions of Eastern religion and scenery at one time current—minaret: crescent: cypress or lotus-bud: Kamakura: jade—when he descends to particulars and gives his impressions a concrete and individual shape, then between Mr Lawrence's Romanticised portrait of the Mexican Indian and the work of several less generally esteemed novelists all manner of curious affinities



## THE LATER PERIOD

spring up in the reader's brain. The following passage, for instance, is culled from a volume of short stories by Mr Michael Arlen, and yet it bears a striking resemblance to many typical and well-known passages composed by the distinguished author of *Mornings in Mexico*—a *parvenu* is eulogising the English upper-classes: "To men like you," Trimalchio announces, "there are not two ways of doing a thing; there is only a right way; and that, with you, is the *instinctive* way"; precisely as it might be Mr Lawrence in respectful communion with a Hopi snake-dancer! You snake-dancers, you buff-skinned aristocrats, you glorified under-dogs, you others *vous autres*, O inscrutable, mysterious, superbly intuitive race to which I, Trimalchio, I, Mr Lawrence, have the misfortune not to belong, you don't use your heads, you don't suffer agonies of indecision; you act intuitively, mindlessly, and lo, your action turns out right! But, just as Mr Arlen's *parvenu* cannot become a real aristocrat, but will become an aristocrat's pathetic *simulacrum*, that distinction itself unattainable except at a considerable expense of the *parvenu's* own native dignity and force of purpose, so Mr Lawrence, urged on by the female demon which latterly controlled his work, could not identify or attempt to identify his genius with the mimetic genius of a Hopi snake-dancer except at considerable detriment to his original European and Britannic literary merits. And yet, paradoxically

## SCRUTINIES II

enough, nobody realised this more clearly than the far-sighted and cool-headed Mr D. H. Lawrence!

"The Indian way of consciousness," writes Mr Lawrence (a passage much quoted and vigorously commented on by Mr Wyndham Lewis in the admirable critical excursion he calls *Paleface*), "is different from and fatal to our consciousness." . . . Evidently it is fatal to the æsthetic consciousness of Mr Lawrence, working upon his sensibility like bootleg alcohol upon the physical equilibrium of his poor Indians. Apply the stimulus, and Mr Lawrence responds in a given form of words, sometimes more and sometimes less eloquently. His response is as instantaneous and as easily prognosticated as the course it follows is usually capricious and illogical. Mr Lawrence's dogma, the *corpus* of prepossessions and misgivings from which the material of his books is ultimately derived, must have come into existence, we feel sure, in rather the same way as (so he tells us) he prefers to think of the universe as having come into being:

"Myself, I don't believe in evolution, like a long string hooked on to a First Cause. . . . I prefer to believe in what the Aztecs called Suns: that is, Worlds successively created and destroyed. The sun itself convulses, and the worlds go out like so many candles when somebody coughs in the middle of them. Then subtly, mysteriously, the sun convulses again, and a new set of worlds begin to flicker alight. . . . I like to think of the whole show going bust, bang!—and

## THE LATER PERIOD

nothing but bits of chaos flying about. . . . I like to think of the world going pop! . . .” .

A series of intellectual explosions resulting in a collection of fixed stars, *idées fixes*, each constellation in turn the focus of activity and excitement, each successively dying down and a new constellation “popping out” into its place!

And the trend of it all, the general conclusion? Why, apparently for the blackleg philosopher into which Mr D. H. Lawrence is here so hard at work transforming himself, the index of a man’s value (be he metaphysician, prophet, poet, or scientist) in this woman-ruled universe of his is the number, so to speak, of pleasure-units, so many electrons, so many calories, with which he is able to supply the female; which would produce, I am afraid, under the constitution of Mr Lawrence’s new revolutionary state, a decided intellectual and spiritual predominance of Negro bandsmen and South American and Spanish dancing-partners! At least, if experimental statistics are correct. We assume that they are incorrect, because the greedy sensationalism which accumulates them—moral equivalent of Mr Lawrence’s literary raptures—goes to its pleasures blindfolded and saves its partner a vast amount of preliminary titillation by arriving, as it were, ready seasoned and primed. So tremulously, expectantly, does Mr Lawrence approach his Noble Savage. It is the drama of *Miss Julie* played out in larger, racial terms. Never are the two opposites farther apart than

## SCRUTINIES II

when one of them prostitutes itself to the other, for the very gesture of self-abasement emphasises the gulf which divides them. They are nearest together when they are asunder, apart and decently conscious of the respective advantages and disadvantages of their twin isolated positions. From their fusion can proceed nothing, absolutely nothing, unless it is a mutual debasement of standards. And so Mr Lawrence is never more conscious of his sophistication than when he allows himself (rhetorically, of course) to hew away at the basis on which his reputation as a European novelist depends. No, the Indian mode of consciousness (a brief acquaintance with the later novels of Mr D. H. Lawrence will persuade us) is not our mode. Try as he may, the ingenious novelist cannot enjoy the best of both worlds. He cannot enjoy the privilege of "mindlessness" and also enjoy the privilege of being a successful writer.

Surely it is an essentially feminine trait, that last—and, in its kind, as typical as the desire to be at one and the same moment emancipated and unfettered as well as cherished, protected, adored. Hardly a page of Mr Lawrence's later novels and stories but implies a similar contradiction and a similar duplicity. I refer, for example, to *St Mawr*:

"Clever men," Louise Carrington says, "are mostly such unpleasant *animals*. As animals so very unpleasant. And in men like Rico, the animal has gone queer and wrong. And in those nice clean boys you liked so much in the war, there is no wild animal left in them. They're all tame dogs, even

## THE LATER PERIOD

when they're brave and well bred. . . . A pure animal man would be as lovely as a deer or a leopard, burning like a flame fed straight from underneath. And he'd be part of the unseen, like a mouse is, even. And he'd never cease to wonder, he'd breathe silence and unseen wonder, as the partridges do, running in the stubble. . . ."

Yet Louise herself is plainly a *clever* woman, a very clever woman. She talks cleverly. She has the modern picturesque knack—"partridges in the stubble . . . breathing silence and unseen wonder." It is from the old man-governed world that such monsters as Louise Carrington and her mother have been born. Generations of "clever, well-bred" men have been necessary to unlock the lattice-door behind which Louise and Mrs Witt had sat age-long, knitting, grumbling, and gossiping, their sole concern with partridges, not the wonder which these charming little birds inhale, but the price they were fetching in the market and whether or not they would be well advised to send out and purchase a brace. . . . But once emancipated, and uneasily conscious, perhaps, that their new-found "cleverness" is not entirely proof against male sarcasms, it is very natural that they should be anxious to eliminate competition. "I love St Mawr," Louise announces, "because he isn't intimate." Loving a stallion entails several advantages, so obvious the commentator need scarcely underline them here: a stallion doesn't answer back; you can box him up. Next best is the stallion's groom: "I believe Lewis has a

## SCRUTINIES II

far more real mind than . . . any of the clever ones. He has a good intuitive mind, he knows things without thinking them." His presence is a degree less satisfactory than St Mawr's; there is always the risk, disagreeable, however trifling, that his physical commitments may conceal an intellectual reservation: an ardent, unselfish lover, and yet, all the while, he may be thinking of something else! Then, it is not a man Louise and Lady Chatterley require so much as a male symbol, a painted totem-pole, a handy monolith. And thus, amid the prodigal outpouring of false sentiment and slurred reasoning, the miserable comedy goes on.

The pity of it is that, granted his dogma, granted his exuberant sexual and racial sentimentalism, Mr Lawrence's style (if he can be said to have ever possessed so disturbingly definite a thing), his haphazard but supremely adroit manner of telling a story, should have thereby suffered irremediable harm. His bounding, loose, enthusiastic sentence sags heavily beneath the inflated self-importance of his message. The arrangement of his stories becomes increasingly diffuse and crabbed: *The Plumed Serpent* degenerated into melodrama, *Lady Chatterley* into uproarious farce. The very excess of his sympathies has betrayed him. A feminine tact, a feminine receptivity and impressionability, underlying and palliating the surface irregularities of his work, has become a worse than feminine hysteria. His lively emotional curiosity has hardened into the tenets of an

## THE LATER PERIOD

incontrovertible sexual dogma. Yes, Mr Lawrence has a dogma now, like Mr Shaw or Mr Wells or Mr Galsworthy. Unlike theirs, his defects are the defects of his qualities; his fall an earnest of his former greatness.

PETER QUENNELL.





Six

WYNDHAM LEWIS

Six

WYNDHAM LEWIS

*by*

EDGELL RICKWORD

FOR a general description of the subject I cannot do better than quote the cover of number three of *The Enemy*: "The 'Enemy' is the notorious author, painter, and publicist, Mr Wyndham Lewis. He is the Diogenes of the day: he sits laughing in the mouth of his tub, and pours forth his invective upon all passers-by, irrespective of race, creed, rank or profession, and sex." The indiscriminate cynicism claimed there has not yet been realised, and in fact Lewis himself has from time to time exposed more altruistic motives. It was perhaps the discovery of the vast extent of the conspiracy to pretend that the Universe *moves* that accounted for his change of temper.

*The Caliph's Design* contains the germ of much that will be found developed in the more extensive writings of Lewis.

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

That early pamphlet is an admirable example of his mental adventurousness, his energy of style, his fecundity in sardonic abuse. It outlines a workable attitude for the artist in relation to the Machine Age, free from the frenzies of the Futurists as well as from the nostalgias of the mediævalists, the cult of the savage and other exoticisms. Also, the fable from which it takes its title reflects the problem which is at the root of most of his critical and controversial writings. There, it will be remembered, it was the Caliph himself who designed the new street that transformed his capital; it was his power that compelled his architects to realise his design; and it is, of course, the mating of vision, capacity, and executive power that is the ideal end of any political theory. The Caliph's street was a good one, we are told; if it had been a bad one it would have had to go up, none the less. Hence the necessity of finding a Caliph, a source of power, which shall also be a touchstone of æsthetic and intellectual quality. That is the problem round which his thought revolves in a spiral, with ever-increasing radius as fresh ramifications present themselves.

A period of very hard reading, the evidence of which is apparent in all Lewis's subsequent books, must have followed the writing of *The Caliph's Design*. But the acquisition of external knowledge revealed further complications in the problem, whole forests of windmills were observed to be massing for an attack on the unarmed and unsuspecting

## SCRUTINIES II

intellect. So much print, perhaps, dazzled the free intelligence of the earlier work; objects of attack acquired the obsessive characteristic of phobias, and instead of greater definition and concentration we have only an extended front.

Besides the pleasure of its comic sarcasms and vituperative energy, *The Art of Being Ruled* has done great service in clearing away many moribund ideas. At the time, I thought it might be a *Culture and Anarchy* for our generation, thinking that the rather thick and muddled prophetics would be cleared up in subsequent pronouncements. This has not yet occurred, and the trend of Lewis's later writings does not encourage one to think that it ever will. He has not that central sureness that Arnold had and that enabled him to give the inadequate formula "sweetness and light," a conception beyond the merely genteel refinement to which in lesser hands it has so comfortably relapsed. But at the moment of positive statement Lewis always breaks down, largely because of his own uncertainty as to what the intelligence, and still more the human being, really is—at one moment buttering it up with fine phrases, at another belittling it with mechanistic metaphors, as it happens to be Plato or some "small man." The fact that they are both men seems repugnant to him. The intelligence is something he would separate from the man (and art, on one occasion, is a "tapping of the supernatural"). But as metaphor is always nearer the real thought than abstract phrase, we may conclude

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

that the concept of mechanism is very close to Lewis's vision of the human being, and this results in the shallow treatment of the central problem of *The Art of Being Ruled*, the relation of the creator of values to the comparatively inert political mass. He says, "This greatest and most valuable of all 'producers' should be accommodated with conditions suitable to his maximum productivity," as if the artist, the intellectual, was a milch-cow turning out nourishment for the benefit of humanity. Intellectual and æsthetic activity is perfectly selfishly motivated, and society will, quite justifiably, refuse to pay anything except when it gets some pleasure out of the result. Is Bergson, "the arch-villain," to be "accommodated with conditions suitable to his maximum productivity," and, so subsidised, poison all the wells of truth? Besides, those conditions are themselves indefinable. Lewis often writes as if one could snatch an "intellectual" out of the welter of experience and put him down in a laboratory or studio, where he would go on functioning even faster. But even in the case of a scientist, we do not know that some maladjustment of his social life may not be of more stimulus to him than external calm. And artists have been notoriously successful under conditions that must seem outrageous to the reforming zeal of a social hygienist. Short of giving the "intellectual" a blank cheque every Friday night, I do not see how he can be accommodated. For, apart from his gifts, he has character as an individual, which means achieving an

## SCRUTINIES II

inner order out of the external disorder. By all means let us have a dole for "intellects" and not a sanatorium. But apart from constituting Lewis omnipotent umpire, I see no means of refusing Bergson or Anita Loos places on the register. A body of experts might be able to relieve obvious necessitous cases, but the judgment of values is such a subtle matter that any repressive tendency, apart from the right of individual criticism, must be deprecated.

It has been a commonplace for a long time to say of Lewis that he is teeming with ideas, that "he can start more hares in a paragraph than another man in a volume." But this facility in starting "ideas" is only half a virtue; if they are not run down they are mere exhalations of an active fantasy working on a rich mass of miscellaneous information. But to have a lot of ideas is no more to be a good thinker than to have a lot of soldiers is to be a good general. Full of suggestive side-views as his treatises are, it must be observed that he is always free to choose his own ground, he has as large a charter as the wind to blow on whom he pleases. Like the rest of his generation he has no concrete political existence, and his view of world politics is a dream based on the dreams, which he dislikes, of other disfranchised intellectuals. It would no doubt be better for the world if Lewis had a seat on the League of Nations Council; it would also be good for Lewis as a thinker to be obliged to bring his ideas into closer touch with actuality.

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

"It is my object," says Lewis, "to carry on a constant campaign for a system of ideas which I wish to propagate. But campaign does not imply a method of activity, or sentiments as regards my opponents, more proper to Marshal Foch [then why use such a misleading metaphor?] than to an artist—compelled, against his will, to clear of refuse a certain tract in order to pursue his way at all."

Really, this "against his will" is rather sanctimonious from one who has always shown such a special aptitude for polemics. I suspect that there is more of the politician and man-of-action flouting Lewis the artist than he cares to admit even to himself. The desire to create (though not the will to) is generally sufficient to induce in the artist a sort of anæsthesia to the hostility surrounding him, an interior calm where his creation may flower, regardless of the cost to his temporarily undefended social personality. It is often in the artist himself that the enemy to creation is most deeply entrenched, in distrust of his own intuitions; in fear of, resulting in contempt for, aspects of his own emotional life.

Lewis has effectively shown the disintegrative effect of contemporary philosophy on the unit of personality, but as that could never have happened had there not been a weakening of desire, so it can never be reintegrated by argument, but only by creation in art of new forms of personality, including their automatism, but transcending it in some concept of passionate and conscious action. One genuinely

## SCRUTINIES II

creative work would dispel these miasmas of doubt and self-distrust that resist all the efforts of ratiocination.

In the midst of perplexity it may sometimes restore self-confidence to ruminate on the egregious errors, basenesses, and perversities of the contemporary world. *The Enemy* prosecutes this method on the grand scale, inviting the equally perplexed intelligentsia to follow the development of a critical system which will restore to them the humanly centred values that scientific-determinism through the time-philosophy is supposed to have destroyed, and so reinvigorate the discouraged æsthetic impulse.<sup>1</sup> But so far from leading his pupils to a position from which they can dominate the Flux through their own self-integrity, he is more likely to leave them crowing on a dunghill of irreproachable platitude. *The Enemy* is too much like a Sunday school where it is preached that sensation and various other things are sin; as soon as Lewis leaves off flogging the hostile idea, the preacher supervenes, and the pulpit-tones roll out loud and deep—"The noble exactitude and harmonious

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* "To create new beauty, and to supply a new material is the obvious affair of art of any kind to-day. But that is a statement that by itself would convey very little. Without stopping to unfold that now, I will summarise what I understand by its opposite. Its opposite is that that thrives upon the *time-philosophy*. . . ." Without stopping to unfold that now . . . Caramuel, a famous Spanish bishop, wrote more than two hundred and sixty works attesting to this first principle—that if people would read his works they need read no others. For this purpose his latest work always referred to the preceding ones, and could not be understood till his readers possessed those that were to follow.



## WYNDHAM LEWIS

proportion of the European, scientific ideal, the specifically Western heaven" is one example of what might be plentifully illustrated. It is the sort of thing that sets all the glands dribbling their quotas of self-complacency into the bloodstream of the hypnotised (specifically Western) listener.

As a critic of literature Lewis is generally sound in his judgments (and a man of his gifts could hardly fail to be so) when he is estimating the not-very-significant figures of fashionable appeal (or rather, for Lewis they are very significant, because they link up with the Great Time-Space conspiracy). But these judgments are suspect because they are not based on the æsthetic effect of the whole work, the only concrete thing to go by, but on the reputed stigmas of noxious influences. His reaction to a writer of the scale of Proust is lamentably thin and doctrinaire—so blinded by his own doctrines that he can describe the *I* of the *Récherche du Temps perdu* as "that small, naïf, Charlie Chaplin-like, luxuriantly-indulged, passionately-snobbish figure."

For Lewis to react to a work of literature at all, it seems necessary for him to find some thesis in it which coincides or conflicts with his own attitude to life. He does not display the critical counterpart of that finest type of mind, which "lifts the creative impulse into an absolute region free of Spenglerian history or politics," in which he asserts his belief. So, in *The Lion and the Fox* he was at ease when he could discover the twin figures of the fable in a play, and

## SCRUTINIES II

on these lines presented a hypothetically interesting Shakespeare (no common feat), but, ignoring the dualism in the creative attitude, a Shakespeare who could never have been a great dramatic poet. Typical of his abstract approach, he lumps all kings together, because they fit his theory of the tragic pathos, though in Shakespeare, at any rate, kings have personal character. But this is a quality which he does not understand. So, knowing that Stendhal was fascinated by Napoleon, he equates Julien Sorel with the Napoleon-idea, a minor truism which dissolves into insignificance in the complete realisation of Sorel as a created individual. But, besides seeing human beings as individuals, Shakespeare had a rather strong interest in sex, which required fuller treatment even in a study of the heroic plays, but was perhaps thought unbecoming in a protégé of a philosophy in which sex is restrained to strictly reasonable proportions. Though the basic conception of *The Lion and the Fox* may be a valuable one for the theory of tragedy in general, its preoccupation with the abstract vitiates the complete absorption in the æsthetic image which alone can give a valid reaction to a poetic work. Only when "ideas of life" are introduced without being transmuted into image is one justified in assessing them against personal "ideas of life." So Lewis is on firm ground when he is attacking semi-creative writers like Sherwood Anderson, or Lawrence in his later phase, but his method resembles witch-hunting more than criticism, and a feeling

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

of its irrelevance pervades most of his treatment of modern movements. There is too great a demand for orthodoxy, a tendency to nip experiments in the bud, say, the *surréaliste*; a grandmotherly solicitude for our infant stomachs, threatened by the hard tack of the New Diabolism. An amusing example of this pedagogic complex is his handsome withdrawal in the case of the threatened prosecution of *South Wind*, and the conclusion that it is "a perfectly harmless production."

*The Enemy* promises his readers emancipation from the mental *clichés* of the time, but up to the present he has done little but provide them with a fresh set of stock reactions; for a champion of the clear outline, etc., the new principles remain remarkably hazy. At a gathering of Enemy supporters I imagine a drowsy summer hum like that which comes through the open windows of the village school. The pupils will hoot whenever the word *Time*,<sup>1</sup> pronounced with

<sup>1</sup> Among the reckless statements to which this fixation on Time is responsible is a paragraph in which every sentence calls for dispute, but here I can only mention the dogma that literature, though less static than the plastic arts, is more static than an art such as music. I do not see how there can be degrees of the static, but that does not matter, for the material of literature is so obviously a succession of events or emotions that it must be dynamic. The merely hypothetical "pure lyric" is the exception that proves the rule. Literature has nothing to gain by becoming "more static," as Hérédia's sonnets show, and Gertrude Stein's success in being quite static is an efficient danger-signal along that road. In Lewis's rhetorical system "dynamic" is a pejorative. But the speed at which literature can deal with events without "blurring outlines in a restless flux" (which, I agree with Lewis, is to be condemned) is simply a matter depending on the technical equipment of the writer, supposing his reader to be normally competent.

## SCRUTINIES II

a hint as to its sinister significance, falls on their ears; they will eschew the "gonadal ecstasies of sex" and espouse "all the male chastity of thought"; they will assert that they are "on the side of the intellect," and sing in chorus "I am for the physical world."<sup>1</sup>

If these are anything more than trite counters, purely emotive trumpetings to herd (though small-herd) action, it should be possible to bring them to clearer definition, to evolve from them some positive and concrete statement as to what might constitute a balanced contemporary human being, instead of being fobbed off with references to "the chaste wisdom of the Chinese or the Greek." I say *contemporary*, because, unless one acts the ostrich, it must be admitted that the conventional notion of personality has been shown to be inadequate—it is as impossible to believe in the absolutely autonomous mind as in the detachable soul.

If Lewis has really got these goods it is time he delivered them. But, of course, when he claims for *his* principle all the remarkable achievements of the past, it is difficult to refuse such an enormous bribe, and easy to overlook the

<sup>1</sup> Of the great solace to be found in having a word of indefinite content to lean upon we had an amusing illustration in *The New Criterion*, when the actual meaning of the pet words of T. S. Eliot and J. Middleton Murry (*intelligence* and *intuition* respectively) came up for debate. Herbert Read has staked out a claim to *reason*. Other examples, on less austere planes of thought, abound. This forecast has been fulfilled in *Satire and Fiction*. Among other examples, a letter is printed there from Dr Meyrick Booth in which Lewis's favourite doctrines are preached back at him with consummate parrottry.

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

fact that this principle has so far only been described by its effects, not defined in itself.

"I have defined art as the science of the outside of things, and natural science as the science of the inside of things. . . . A preoccupation with the vitals of 'Life' (of the 'Up life! Down art!' cry) means invariably the smoking-hot inside of things, in contrast to the hard, cold, formal skull or carapace. The *emotional* of the Bergsonian dogma is the heat, moisture, shapelessness, and tremor of the vitals of life. The *intellectual* is the ectodermic case, the ideality of the animal machine, *with its skin on*."

This is typical Lewisonian persuasion by rhetoric, but the metaphors should not be allowed to get away with it too easily. A preoccupation with the hard, cold, formal skull or carapace of things may just as well be emotional as intellectual, may be due, in fact, simply to inhibition, to fear of the emotional; and that is not a very reputable origin for the intellect. Certainly, I should agree, if we must speak as if the mind had separate faculties, that the intellect had better be the unemotional, ordering one. But Lewis wants more than that, he wants to be able to call art intellectual (it follows from the first and last sentences of the above quotation). But granted that the "intellect works alone" (see next quotation), the æsthetic faculty does not, it must include the emotional, the Dionysian. It is this distrust of the Dionysian which is responsible for all Lewis's distortions,

## SCRUTINIES II

his rationalisations, as well as for the harsh, strained quality of his picture of human life.

"Action (the Dionysiac and dynamical) is highly specialist. But action is impossible without an *opposite*—it takes two to make a quarrel. The dynamical—or what Nietzsche called the Dionysiac, and which he professed—is a *relation*, a something that happens, between two or more opposites, when they meet in their pyrrhic encounters. The intellect works alone."

He assumes that the Dionysian is merely a relaxation, and not a realisation. This is an example, too, of his generally obtuse attitude to Nietzsche.

Lewis admits that the predominance of the Eye in his mentality may give him a fanatical leaning, but this does not make him cautious in levelling charges of the strangest kind against those whose minds are less purely graphic and plastic than he describes his own as being:

"For the mind of Einstein, like that of Bergson or like that of Proust, is not a *physical* mind, as it could be called. It is psychologic, it is mental."

A simpleton might think that this is a proper characteristic of the mind, but Lewis knows better. A less emotional "intelligence" than his would have realised that Einstein's achievement is as concrete as anything in the plastic arts. The new view of the universe is one to be assimilated, not

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

rejected, or smothered as the Church tried to smother Galileo's discovery. The human mind has absorbed such shocks before, the sort of shock Donne records in the well-known passage:

“ And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it,”

but Lewis does not trust it to do so again, and assumes the rôle of a benevolent Canute, protecting the shores of the physical world by a naïve injunction. And his attitude to the “new Philosophy” is surprisingly pragmatical in one who has indicted James as a forerunner of the attack on the intellect: “What I am concerned with here, first of all, is not whether the great time-philosophy that overshadows all contemporary thought is viable as a system of abstract truth, but if in its application it helps or destroys our human arts.”

And a regard for “abstract truth,” whatever abstract may mean there, at least a regard for ascertaining the facts as exactly as possible, is surely a function of the intellect as generally understood, if not of *The Enemy's* elusive principle. Lewis says somewhere that his polemical works are a hasty barrage put down behind the cover of which temples may be constructed. But, as experience has taught us, besides its quantity, the accuracy of a barrage is of some importance.

## SCRUTINIES II

“Friendly” shells in one’s own lines are apt to spoil the *morale* of the troops more than enemy shells, and in his indiscriminate lumping together of real achievement and fashionable mediocrity Lewis comes very near to putting some shells through the structure of the very temple he is so anxious to see erected.

Nashe has often been referred to as a probable influence on the prose style of Lewis, and it will be found that in their technique of argument, too, they are not dissimilar. They are alike in having a robust, not very subtle intelligence. Nashe, too, was suspicious of the “revolutionary” thought of his age:

“I heare say there be Mathematicitions abroad, that will prove men before *Adam*, and they are harboured in high places, who will maintaine it to the death, that there are no divels.” These seem to have been predecessors of Lewis’s Time-philosophers. Nashe also spotted what is one of Lewis’s favourite complaints—the competition of the wealthy amateur with the genuine artist. Nashe, however, restrains his grievance to the personal:

“All my thoughts consorted to this conclusion, that the world was uncharitable, and I ordained to be miserable. Thereby I grew to consider how many base men that wanted those parts which I had, enjoyed content at will and had wealth at command . . . and have I more wit than all these (thought I to myself)? am I better born? am I better brought



## WYNDHAM LEWIS

up? yea, and better favoured? and yet am I a beggar? What is the cause? how am I crost? or whence is this curse?

“Even from hence, *that men that should employ such as I am, are enamoured of their own wits*, and think whatever they do is excellent, though it be never so scurvie . . . that every grosse brained Idiot is suffered to come into print, who if he set forth a Pamphlet of the praise of Pudding-pricks, or write a treatise of *Tom Thumme*, or the exploits of Untrusse, it is bought up thick and threefold, when better things lie dead.”

Is not this an epitome of the central contention of *The Apes of God*?

Under the novel appearance given to Lewis's criticism by his extraordinary faculty of systematisation one can recognise so many of the stock themes of the satirist, that one is inclined to think that in spite of its philosophical pretensions, it has a source nearer “the hot vitals of life” than calm judgment. Only having as it were too queasy a stomach for satire, we have to have it wrapped up in an edifying pastry. The only other equally comprehensive effort to point out that the intellectual world contains numbers of mugs and charlatans was attempted by a syndicate, the Scriblerus Club, who parcelled out among themselves the several provinces of Dullness. Lewis is the whole Club in himself—Arbuthnot for the fantasies of the scientists; Pope, if we equate the Rue de l'Odeon with Grub Street; Swift, only

## SCRUTINIES II

portraying mechanical Robots instead of bestial yahoos. But the product so far, owing to this attempt to double the function of satirist and teacher, has been too discursive, only in rare sections achieving plastic unification, even in *The Childermass*, which should have been wholly that.

It is obvious that at the basis of the satirist's sensibility is the feeling that this is, in certain aspects, the worst of all possible worlds; it is not necessary for him to justify that feeling to anyone else's satisfaction, the images he creates should be powerful enough to induce a similar (if only momentary) conviction in the spectator. But Lewis seems to be uneasy in his distaste, and to seek all kinds of extraneous justifications for it. He even, it appears, visualises himself rather as a redeemer than a castigator. In a remark which contains an amazing *nonsequitur* he says, "supposed as I am to be a kind of almost professionally 'aggressive' person (which plainly I cannot be or I could not do so much work). . . ." Substituting "writer" or "artist" for "person," I should say that the only proper evidence, the most characteristic style, goes rather against his repudiation of aggressiveness. In fiction, criticism, or drawing his most characteristic style is reached when he is antipathetic to the subject; when he is sympathetic, as he claims to be to the Greek world, his style is as trite as that of a classical don.

For in *Tarr* and *The Wild Body* the spectator or narrator is on a superior plane of consciousness to the actors. They

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

are given certain stimuli and obliged to react by a sort of conditioned reflex, but Tarr or Ker-Orr move with a godlike autonomy. So judicial an eye for the folly, error, and sensual chaos which makes up the greater part of existence results in a weakening of consciousness and produces a technically adequate, but thin achievement. This acting the naturalist to characters, too, produces a sort of priggishness, since Tarr and Ker-Orr are so neutral themselves. Tarr is so afraid of Life getting in the way of his art that he reduces its significance to a minimum. What he calls the "curse of humour" in him results in an "inverted Quixotry":

"Instead of having conceived the world as more chivalrous and marvellous than it was, he had conceived it as emptied of all dignity, sense, and generosity. The drovers and publicans were angry at not being mistaken for a legendary chivalry, for knights and ladies. The very windmills resented not being taken for giants!"

There has been a tendency from Taine to Watson which has led to a doubt as to whether human beings are quite so individual as they once thought themselves. The forces of environment, occupation, and glandular action have been admitted to account for much. For Lewis, at one time, I judge from "Inferior Religions" they accounted for a great deal, that view has certainly influenced his fiction. Against its absolute implications he has struggled rather desperately

## SCRUTINIES II

in his critical work. His fiction has been praised because it is "stripped of sentimentality," which means, I suppose, that he does not allow any humanistic concepts to blur his vision of the creature's "ectodermic case"; and it is perhaps in this sense that Lewis calls *Tarr* "in a sense the first book of an epoch in England." For the novel does not innovate in form: the objectification of mental processes in a humorous and highly metaphorical prose is what most characterises it. *The Wild Body* consists of studies of simpler organisms than those in *Tarr*, vividly grotesque, and written with a complete mastery of the intention. They exist as the record of a peculiar vision. Whether, as æsthetic achievement, they correspond to the expository essays may be doubted.

As only one-third of *The Childermass* has yet been published, much cannot be said about it. Certainly the first volume does not generate any high degree of dramatic tension; the conflict remains abstract in spite of its projection into an admirably realised landscape of desolate, shifting time-tracts. But the Bailiff's court is tediously lengthy. The objects of satire are so familiar from Lewis's critical writing, that to have them rather vaguely personified is an inadequate gilding of the pill. "*Where any sex-nuisance is concerned,*" Lewis once wrote, and italicised, "*the Greek indifference is the best specific.*" If he had taken his own medicine he would have spared us the bleary pathics who draw so many of his shafts. The shade of Joyce, too,

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

is strangely prominent, being not only laid under contribution for technical effects, but stimulating the flow of animus to an extent for which, even as symbol, it seems inadequate, to a detached reader. Both *Ulysses* and *The Childermass* are largely works of exasperation; the first named has an effective coda which does resolve the Bloom-theme, though the Stephen-theme is left up in the air. *The Childermass* has yet to be seen in its totality, but its exasperations, being less concrete, are less general than those of *Ulysses*. In *Ulysses* it is any body and any mind that suffers, in any city on any sweltering day (its particularity has precisely that effect, unexpectedly), on the lowest common level of humanity, the sensuous one, just capable of sexual jealousy and parental affection. The panoramic phantasmagoria of *The Childermass* is a description of the world under the disintegration of Time-philosophy and its subsidiary influences, which, to put it briefly, make everything unreal. But to us the conflict itself seems unreal, since the Bailiff is so obviously an Aunt Sally (for instance, he is made to say, "I prefer hot blood to your beastly intellects"), an abstract invention adequate to support the dialectics of *The Enemy*, but not an æsthetic creation. The volume ends on the claim of the anti-Bailiffites to *reality*.

It is up to Lewis to make them real.

In *The Apes of God* the antipathetic artist I postulated has magnificently found himself. If there could have been

## SCRUTINIES II

any doubt, after *The Childermass*, as to Lewis being the most forceful and resourceful prose-writer of his generation there can be none now. That *The Apes of God* is a work of great technical power is certain, but it is not so easy to decide whether it is equally considerable as a work of art. For that, the value of the underlying conception has to be assessed. The triviality of the subject-matter is no more against than it is against the *Dunciad*, which *The Apes of God* most resembles; but no one could say that the *Dunciad* is intellectually absorbing. It is like an action brilliantly transmuted into the plastic of gesture. And when, in *Satire and Fiction*, Lewis suggests that the greatest satire cannot be moralistic, he is asserting what seems to me a flaw in his work. In the crude, prohibitive sense of moral it certainly cannot be, but there must be somewhere in the satire, implicit or explicit, a standard or ideal of conduct from which the victims are observed to deviate. So the fine reasonableness of the houyhnhnms was necessary to the crapulousness of the yahoos. This standard the hazy lucubrations of the absent Pierpoint are inadequate to supply; and though Dan, in his utter negativeness, may be realistically true to a contemporary type, artistically he is a heavy liability, and he is largely responsible for the stickiness of the action, since his character precludes the possibility of any clash of personality, a lack emphasised by the failure of the characters ever to stand up for themselves. But

## WYNDHAM LEWIS

there are numerous episodes, such as the climax of the Klein luncheon party or the meeting between Mr Zagreus and the Split-man, which show that the creator of *Kreisler* is capable of more general and therefore more interesting satire than that arising from indignation at the presence of minor artists in the social limelight.

Without Lewis contemporary literature would be very much less alive, and in a less promising condition, probably, than it is. He has been a great ice-breaker, and his ridicule has scorched up many pretentious shams. But latterly his energy has been spent in a reckless way; one is reminded of a powerful man tormented by gnats. The apostolic fervour which the campaign for their extermination develops as it grows is a sign of a weakening of the sense of reality, of that humour which we possess, perhaps, so that we may be enabled to live in a society at all, the number of inimical influences being necessarily so enormous.

EDGELL RICKWORD.





Seven

## THE THREE SITWELLS

Seven

## THE THREE SITWELLS

*by*

SHERARD VINES

IN this trinity there is some unity, though less, perhaps, than the general are apt to believe. But at least we, the plain general, have learnt neither to regard these divinities as three incomprehensibles, nor to label them vaguely, helplessly, "cubist," as has been done in the past. Sitwell stock has (to change the figure) fluctuated: at the moment it is high—above par, one might say—the advance being partly due to a certain amount of manipulation which, indeed, as purely business tactics, is quite justifiable.

"Are Sitwells safe?" inquired Douglas Goldring years since in a droll verse. Safe as far as the semi-speculative can be so: the true price, having regard to assets, should stand near par; but there is some danger of depreciation,

## THE THREE SITWELLS

and the market manipulation, while, inflating the present value, may some day accentuate the fall.

Mr Mégroz, with the best intentions in the world, has failed, one suspects, to do the Sitwell cause the good that he intended;<sup>1</sup> and though many of his points are excellent, the result of others may yet prove unfortunate. To have made so much of their ancestry was to enfeeble the claims of their art. Since pithecanthropoid Adam we have all contracted ancestors, but few of us have written poems, and fewer, even, poems of the Sitwell calibre. The first two chapters of his otherwise admirable book approach perilously near the society chit-chat that Osbert deprecates with such vigour in the Preface to *All at Sea*: and it helps us very little towards a Sitwell exposition to learn that "Mary Cholmondeley . . . the popular author of *Red Pottage* . . . was related to the Hebers." It adds no fresh significance to Osbert's phrase of the "vileness that Bishop Heber psalms," and still less to the beauties of *The Thirteenth Cæsar*. Mr Mégroz's book was a gesture of genuine homage: there was understanding and sympathy; but, with an eye to the future, may one suggest that it might have been sounder policy to have left the Sitwells crying their own wares, as they are eminently capable of doing. Self-advertisement was necessary, tactful, courageous, and successful: not only did it puff the product, but it educated

<sup>1</sup> Cf. his *The Three Sitwells*.

## SCRUTINIES II

the public in poetic luxury. It was a fanfare that cracked, if it did not overthrow, the walls of the Georgian Jericho (*vide*, for example, pages 8 and 12 of *Poetry and Criticism*), and threw open the gates of aristocratic parks to literary trippers more widely than the artists of the "nineties" had thrown them. All three are competent, Osbert most, Sacheverell least, to blow evangelic trumpets, and have a genius for turning hostile weapons to their own account, as readers of press notices collected at the end of *Wheels* will remember.

In the process of the struggle for artistic life and liberty, we find them promoting the redecoration of verse, its enrichment after the pernicious anæmia which, though it was evident in the days of Rupert Brooke, would now no doubt have been condemned by that truly honest poet were he living to witness its ravages. If for no other reason, the name of Sitwell should live because of this restoration to poetry of its legitimate substance—colour, shape, palpability, ornament. We may sneer at the *clichés* of wooden parrots and golden ladders; but let us at least admit that through the Sitwells English poetry has caught up with the fashions of Baudelaire and the Symbolists, and is gravid with the promise of passing beyond into a subtler metaphysical realm. The metaphysical poem and the *conte philosophique* are being more seriously exploited elsewhere, but the lead in this direction given by some of the work of

## THE THREE SITWELLS

Edith and Sacheverell deserves more notice than it receives. The Sitwells have accomplished more than poets of the "nineties," like Symonds: they have picked the brains of the Frenchmen, yet steered English poetry clear of the danger of mere imitation, and of acquiring a sickly flavour of Parisian Bohemia. Sacheverell, in gathering inspiration from lines by Milton, Pope, Peele, or Marlowe, has best set the example: returning to England, he eschews the insular provincialism that would have us, between "orgasms" of morris-dancing on a vicarage lawn, note the note of the yaffle on the neighbouring whitethorn or laburnum, as the case may be; nor, on the other hand, is there a vestige of the self-conscious and irritating continentalism of the patchouli school. Since their hey-day, as described by Mr Burdett, and even Mr Jackson, we realise, reading the Sitwells, that many things have happened: Picasso, Severini, the war, the Russian ballet and Revolution, the London Group and Mercury have come—and, some of them, gone; there have been fashions for Donne, Pope, el Greco, Longhi, even for Woollett; while the feeling for history, for period, has so intensified that editors are jostling each other to violate the obscurer, later Augustans, and Tottenham Court Road groans beneath suburban orders for Chippendale. These things are reflected in Sitwell writings, where, though not everywhere, the period feeling can be seen at its best, *i.e.* at a stage at which the feeler rises above pastiche to

## SCRUTINIES II

interpreting the period in his or her own idiom. Miss Sitwell has often the happy knack of it, and of illumining a line with this sublimated past, as when she describes the pelisse of Grisi the ondine, or of the queen on the tartan wave seen remarking the crinoline of the lily, while the seraphs (sculptured, no doubt, by Gilbert Scott) recline on divans divine of polished pitch-pine.

This is a very different thing from period revival, from Pugin, Ruskin, or Morris, from "ye olden tymes," pictures of fat monks, and stained-glass windows by Wailes or Powell: yet it is from such material, wrongly dismissed as dreary or unpromising, that they weave: the Albert Memorial itself is forced, not without satire, to yield unintended charms. Against this type of art it may be urged that there is too great a temptation in it to relapse into mere mockery of the elder generation, a mere shocking of the staid; and into the frivolity of the virtuoso. *Façade* is perhaps indictable under these heads; but, on the other hand, the method offers at least one satisfactory solution of the problem of period-treatment, and an argument against the slightly earlier "pure art" demoniacs who forsook history for an Hesperides heavy with unripe apples somewhat after Cézanne. There are one or two anti-Spenglerians who, themselves heretical, object on principle to "period beauty"; which, they maintain, is irreconcilable with the static and the permanent—the true essentials of beauty. The ostrich,

## THE THREE SITWELLS

burying its head in the sand, believes its rump to be invisible; but those who bury the past, though they do so, we must admit, in a good cause, are reducing, and not as they think enlarging, the æsthetic scope of posterity.

There is a sort of beauty which, while it is characteristic of a certain age and differs from the static beauty that is uncoloured by time, is as likely as anything to be permanent, and must be distinguished from mere antiquity for its own sake. *The Sleeping Beauty*, in many ways Miss Sitwell's best poem, illustrates the point copiously: the dead past interprets the living present, and the patched and powdered countesses are much more than process copies of Rigaud and Watteau.

If Osbert is less skilled at the game, it is because his *flair* for the antique, being stronger, demands a more direct expression, and in a realistic rather than in a symbolic mode. He brings new treasures to the hammer:

“ . . . wooden vases turned  
So beautifully, and full of dried dull grasses,  
Tied with rusty ribbons  
That rustled suffocatingly. . . . ”<sup>1</sup>

The characters in this recent poem, like those in *Triple Fugue* and *Before the Bombardment*, seem to have been regarded primarily as objects of *virtu*, and only after that as living creatures, whereas Edith's Jane or Noah's daughter live

<sup>1</sup> *England Reclaimed*.

## SCRUTINIES II

intensely from the beginning. Sacheverell's exhaustive and metaphysical character-treatment results in the creation of solid entities like Gargantua and Dr Donne upon foundations of the English humours, of the traditions of La Bruyère, or our own *Microcosmographie*. If not deliberately based upon these, his treatment is a logical development from them. Gargantua becomes a concrete universal type, in his sensual world; Dr Donne in his quill-strewn battleground. The secret of their reality is perhaps in the care that has been taken to build them from within, subjectively, in contrast to what is evidently the external method of Osbert (vide *Dr Donne and Gargantua*).

Most people look to the trinity for decoration and satire, and some for speculative thought as well; and, not without reason, hold Osbert to be the main satirist-controversialist. He is this, and more; indeed, his work suffers from his versatility. All of it deserves a reading, but, once read, his lyric verse is seen to be inferior to his sister's, and his satire to Mr Lewis's: like the fiction and the essays, it is most efficient, but might have reached a higher level. In his youth, he confesses: "I was dogged curiously by the suspicious words, written in every report, 'might do better if he chose.'" That suspicion, alas, remains. There are superb moments, as in *Before the Bombardment*, when he actually chose; the schoolmaster who has visions and, on rhetorical grounds, addresses his scholars as "boes" is un-



## THE THREE SITWELLS

forgettable; but in Colonel Spofforth,<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, we recognise an old stage-property, worth nothing at all at Willis's, of the dammy-dammy-what-what order.

His more controversial manner is deficient in attack and ruthlessness. Mr Lewis rushes joyfully, Mr Sitwell petulantly, into the fray; Mr Lewis cudgels and excoriates (as in *The Enemy*) where Mr Sitwell administers a good hard smacking. My one regret at the time of the flyting with Mr X. (vide *All at Sea*) was that he fought too fairly. Satire, and her sister sport Controversy, require their devotees to hit early and often below the belt. Pope knew the art, and so, in at least one reply to a critic, did Tennyson. But were I Archie Bear de Bear I should feel little the worse for the playful taps delivered in the Preface to *All at Sea*; nor, I imagine, did this disturb the hypothetical Wicked Old Men Who Made the War:

“ The kindly old gentlemen cried  
To the young,  
‘ Will you sacrifice  
Through your lethargy  
What your fathers died to gain?  
Our cause is in peril.  
The world must be made safe for the young.’  
And the children  
Went. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

An excellent chance missed, supposing the Old Gentlemen

<sup>1</sup> *Argonaut and Juggernaut.*

## SCRUTINIES II

ever to have existed. <sup>6</sup> Yet up to a certain point it stings, and is, as one said in 1922 of the then modern art, highly amusing.

Miss Sitwell's gift for intimate satire has, to our loss, been less frequently exercised; we recollect with delight *The County Calls*, or the old lady trying to catch, through her ear-trumpet, that of the Last Judgment. It is impudent, yet always in good—perhaps too good—taste. Queen Victoria sitting shocked upon the rocking-horse in *Façade* will give the elders nothing more than a delightful shudder, and few latter-day parsons would disagree with the proposition that “the cat’s in his cradle, all’s right with the world.” Yet, without removing her elegant gloves, she can tweak shrewdly, and does not even spare the inanimate, referring, with some cattishness, to the “saturnine, asinine bray of the seas,” or the light braying like an ass. But this is, too, a dig at the naturalist poetasters whose sea is quite possibly azure, and light pearly; and the well-known trick of sense-term exchange is explained in her *Poetry and Criticism*, for such as are not already aware of it. There is also in this essay some admirably caustic though brief comment on these very naturalistic versifiers, and their press impresarios.

Satire skips nimbly through some of the pages of *The 101 Harlequins*; nimbly, unburdened either with petulance or *sæva indignatio*, does she pounce upon ladies instructing their gardeners:

## THE THREE SITWELLS

" . . . the borders are not neat enough,  
These stalks again are short enough.<sup>1</sup>  
Why aren't they longer? "

" Yes, M'um."

This, and some other mirthful censure, is far from Ercles' vein, and suggests that Sacheverell is less likely to allow his muse to be "rattled" by the absurdity of events: she retains her balance at the most disconcerting moments. We may therefore presume to attribute to him the more acrobatic portions of the fun in *All at Sea*. He alone of the three has so far no need to use as an ingredient the bitters of the splenetic mood.

Of his *flair* for period one might say that it is the most sublimated, the most translated from time into poetry: it is to the Platonic space that his Spanish captain belongs (*Convent Thoughts in Cadiz*) as he comes out of the baracoon into glossy, shaking sunlight; or his Laocoon (what a predilection for -coons!), "carven by some Liszt or Paganini of the stoneyard," which he converts into something rarer and finer than the gross panache that intrigued Lessing.

*The Cyder Feast* and Edith's *Elegy* register changes in style and substance. The former has a pastoral, the latter a speculative bias. Neither of the two poets seems to be, as yet, quite at home in the respective media, with the result that some of their readers have, to my knowledge, expressed

<sup>1</sup> *Sic*; why merely "short enough"?

## SCRUTINIES II

disappointment and fear that a regression from the zenith is probable. While there is no reason to apprehend a serious collapse, it must be confessed that these two books contain some repetition of phrases and ideas that are by this time become Sitwell *clichés*; thus, we find:

EDITH: 'The hairy and the bestial skies,' 'baskets of ripe fruit,' 'bird-feathered water,' and 'plumed wines,' in opposition to 'beauteous green,' a standard palæologism which perhaps—and one hopes so—was deliberately introduced.

SACHEVERELL: 'Lions with yellow manes,' 'honey,' 'hairy bagpipes' [two ideas which occurred in Edith's *Sleeping Beauty*], 'runged ladders,' '(wandering) winds.'

We have met all these things so many times before, that now they seem to hint at the carelessness that arises from staleness, or even fatigue. In passing, let it be said that *England Reclaimed*, on the other hand, bears the imprint of the energetic pioneer, rejoicing in virgin soil, and is Osbert's strongest poetic essay hitherto.

It was no doubt intended that the purely antiquarian interest of *Southern Baroque Art* should have been dominated by the timeless or "non-period" beauty of Baroque which, accentuated by the exquisiteness and atmosphere of the prose, might be caught into the modern synthesis, where there is certainly a place (or certainly was) for Baroque art. But this vast undertaking was attacked before maturity; the subject mastered the artist, and the prose, though frequently exquisite (pp. 30, 144, 145), lapses into the tired pedestrian-

## THE THREE SITWELLS

ism of, say, a Lanzi (pp. 91, 187), so that the effect of the whole is of aspiration baffled, of a great prize barely but irrevocably lost. Yet the promise shown here has been amply fulfilled in the less ambitious *All Summer in a Day*, where a note is struck not at variance with the idyllic tendency noticeable in his more recent verse. The "grand" hotel of yesterday is captured as a period-piece, palm court, colonial gazettes and all; but more than this, it is woven into the permanent fabric of the artist's creation, it is established and purged of its merely accidental value (*vide* the chapter called "The Oasis in Winter").

Sacheverell's pastoral adventures in *The Cyder Feast* make an even better showing as decoration than Edith's crinolines and pelisses; here is something that comes up smiling from its immersion in the river of time, fresher than ever—not Mantuan, not Barnabe Googe himself, could stale it. Room is left for development of this concession, however much it has been leased to past poets; and it may be on these rustic grounds that he will definitely outstrip, as one still feels that he is capable of doing, his brother and sister. . . . This would probably entail the abandonment of the Donne-Gargantua speculative conceits—a wise course, perhaps.

The thoughtfulness of Osbert has consisted so far largely of indignation, while Edith's is still, and despite the bustle of *Bucolic Comedies*, pessimistic. In *The Sleeping Beauty* we left the gardener, with his old bagpipe, moralising gloomily

## SCRUTINIES II

on the hopelessness of venturing into a "strange land"; and the last poem in *Rustic Elegies* attempts, with no great conviction, to pierce the gloom of mortality. The conclusions of her syllogisms are thought; the premises, feeling—a process that is difficult for the modern poet, obsessed with the fear of sentimentality, to handle. In *Bucolic Comedies* we may suspect her at moments of such an obsession.

Mr Mégroz calls Osbert and Edith romantic, and Sacheverell classical, which is hardly satisfactory. We may perhaps oppose, in their art, feeling to reason; rather, I would say, in the work of the first two reason emerges from feeling, and in that of the last feeling from reason. But surely it is better in dealing with all three to banish, if we can, the old ideas of an irreconcilable classic and romantic; feeling and reason are not necessarily the *propria* of either. Nor is the feeling for history necessarily romantic, as Mr Wyndham Lewis, unless I mistake him, would have us believe; the romantic Malory had none of it, while the classic Dryden (cf. *The British Worthy* and its epistle dedicatory) certainly had his share. We must look for a new term to define a quality common not merely to the Sitwells, but to other poets, such as Mr Eliot, whose verse, charged with profound feeling and ripe thought, one would hesitate, remembering Shelley and Swinburne, to call romantic, or, thinking of Pope and Addison, to call classical. The hardness and glitter of what is termed modern poetry contributes

## THE THREE SITWELLS

to it; but is not the whole of the matter, which includes a refusal to compromise, even with oneself. The self-compromising poet bubbles spontaneously; the other sort sets himself a problem to solve.

But to return to Edith's conceptualising: after *Bucolic Comedies* it reappears with a didactic twist at the end of *Rustic Elegies*, where we proceed from the "mineral consciousness" to the "Divinity in man," accompanied by our old friends the *Personified Abstracts*, and provided, through welcome annotations, with clues to her reading. These and the tone of the poem set us wondering whether the universals of thought will in future prevail over, and perhaps clothe themselves in, the particulars of her ornament, and whether she may make progress along the didactic way as her brother may along the pastoral; if so, her inspiration should receive a new lease of life—as we ever humbly pray.

She gives the effect of having thought more conscientiously than her brothers about art and life, though readers of *All Summer in a Day* will recollect some of the author's preoccupations with the former amusement. But in her *Poetry and Criticism* she goes seriously to work about the general issue, if she does not penetrate very far. The reason for the failure to strike the true oil of truth may be that she suffers, or suffered in 1925, from the well-known illusion that "young" or revolutionary art is the only living kind.

## SCRUTINIES II

While, with justice, she is caustic at the expense of Wordsworth's foolish contemporary reviewers, she disapproves no less of an early opinion, in *Blackwood's*, that Shelley raved. Some of us "moderns" may, perhaps, be disposed to agree with Blackwood that Shelley could rave upon occasion, and find ourselves in agreement with Peacock's attack on nature-poets, which she quotes on the next page. But in explaining herself she is entirely helpful, guiding us towards a true estimation of her genius by significant confessions, as that she supports Cocteau's faded theory that "the music-hall, the circus, and American ragtime bands . . . fertilise an artist as life does." Once, indeed, such dogma was salutary, but even in 1925 it was surely beginning to date. Her admiration for Miss Stein for "bringing back life to language" is again important, illustrating (a) the not sufficiently reasoned belief in "revolution," and (b) another "dated" enthusiasm, since which the *stein*-blind alley has now been more methodically explored. The stimulus of ballets and music-halls, the "abstract" word-pattern, such were the desiderata of 1920, if not of an earlier age. To-day Miss Sitwell seems to move, in poetic practice at least, to another goal, as I have attempted to show.

A final unity is discerned with mixed feelings—the possible impermanence in poetry of the Sitwell *décor*, in all its varieties. Already it seems as though this glittering, wind-swept edifice, where angelic harps vie with mandolines and



## THE THREE SITWELLS

roundabouts, is doomed in its turn to become a period-piece, a thing for museums, a theme for sucking B.Litts., anxious to pursue the anti-Georgian tendency to its cradle in the seventeens and eighteens. Does a Sitwellian twilight gild and enruby *England Reclaimed* and the other recent issues? And are there no juniors to found a school? Such doubts evoke melancholy, which increases in strength when we view the works of the younger poets—Mr Warren and Mr Stead going their country walks, Mr Church at his decolorisation, Mr Plomer striking satiric flashes, unsophisticated wildfire, to accompany Mr Campbell's South African thunder; and while we shall not forget Mr Harold Acton, we must confess to the number of able poets for whom the trinity appear to have lived in vain, though all are no doubt perfectly conscious of, and possibly grateful for, the Sitwellian enrichment.

Something of the exchange of sense-terms is found among other writers, though it does not follow that they borrowed the notion from the Sitwells. But the horn-pipe and the mouth-organ rhythms with which Edith has increased our metrical wealth, the fruit and ladders of Sacheverell, are scarcely as contagious as was the couplet after Waller and Denham, or Spenserianism in Jacobean and late Augustan times—or, at any rate, is not yet proved to be so. The sumptuous style may, of course, be revived at any time—it corresponds to "anticyclonic" moods of dilation that are

## SCRUTINIES II

bound to recur between constricted periods. But just at present the constricted type of art (Mr Read, Mr Church) seems to be making headway in some inner æsthetic circles. Mr Campbell is, in his titanic and different way, generous with the ornament; Mr Plomer, as a poet, less so, resorting as he does to the drypoint more often than to the palette. Some might even see a reaction at the moment against the Sitwellian revolt of the baker's dodecade, 1913-26; a revolt which, though hampered by the war at its outset, flared up, fed on irritation at the meagre simplicity still in vogue, with polychromatic and polymorphous grandeur. At all events we must be thankful for the display, and give the fullest recognition to those who have reclad, plumped out, and lifted the face of our debile modern muse.

Early in this essay I suggested that "Sitwells" are now quoted at a price slightly in excess of their actual value, and that the prudent literary investor should look for something nearer par—a good 98, let us say. Their value; but which value—historical or absolute? The latter, if we may assume an absolute for our convenience. The judging of such value requires even more of the connoisseur's trained instinct than does historical assessment; and with some diffidence of this faculty one may claim to observe in our three some substantial obstacles to perfection, which as usual require to be described in metaphor. Miss Sitwell, avoiding grand issues, flies too often for refuge to lesser beauties, to a passionate

## THE THREE SITWELLS

triviality; thus, even in her more speculative and later work, it seems as though there were occlusion of the full vista. She may have poignancies that Dryden lacked; but Dryden had a full sweep, a vast freedom of action that she denies and perhaps must deny herself. In art Dryden did not fear Universals.

The other two are more easily scrutinised. Osbert, hampered by a certain frivolity of style and composition from complete liberty in, as it were, all three dimensions, falls just short of effectiveness in satire, and achieves a fresco-like flatness in *Before the Bombardment*, to take an example, which leaves us even at this late hour exclaiming, "Shows promise, but might do better." Sacheverell has suffered (cf. *Southern Baroque Art*) from insufficient nervous control of that organisation without which style, the act of creation, suffers; he is still his muse's servant, though time may improve matters. In all three something like a neurasthenia forbids them to grapple wholly with, or wholly master, the problems set, though the problems may be most laudable. But in history the problems deserve yet more praise, and their composers, too, for they mark, if they did not initiate, the movement of determination to cure art of her Edwardian jejuneness; they have created Sitwellism, that many coloured treatment for a simplicity which is still a widespread neurosis. Sitwellism has as good a chance of emerging from historical vapours as conspicuously as the Wilde school,

## SCRUTINIES II

and more so, beyond all doubt, than that of the Spasmodics; while its effects may reach much farther than either's. It is of course lighter than pre-Raphaelitism, though fortunately weight and numbers do not always tell in the end of a literary episode: Morris and Rossetti failed, when all is said and done, to indicate, as Wordsworth did, an important crisis. The Sitwells may share none of Wordsworth's excellences, but they are placed obviously at a critical point, where there is every opportunity for a departure from the old naturalism that dies hard, but is a debased remnant of the Wordsworthian tradition; a departure, too, more seemly than those of certain American "moderns," who are at the moment likewise overvalued by some of their promoters. The "nineties" had tried a secession, but under Edward the Peacemaker we realised that it had not carried them far; this one, with its robust appearance, seems to promise much more when reduced to terms of change and time.

SHERARD VINES.

Eight

LYTTON STRACHEY

Eight

LYTTON STRACHEY

*by*

CHRISTOPHER SALTMARSH

“ . . . unfortunately, mere intelligence is not itself quite enough to make a great historian.”

LYTTON STRACHEY.

A CRITICAL reconsideration of the nineteenth century was inevitable after the iconoclastic “nineties” had worked general havoc among the family bibles, but the Georgians were too occupied in “getting back to Nature,” some by communing with God on the hills, others, more sensibly, by moderate potations of beer in rural inns, to perform the necessary task. The Victorian Revival was further delayed by the War, so that when it finally arrived, its novelty was an irresistible temptation to hungry *poseurs*, and what had started as a critical reaction was swept into a fashionable renaissance. The fashion, indeed, was already a little jaded

## LYTTON STRACHEY

when Harold Acton had deserted his Oxford aspidistras and Cecil Beaton exchanged Cambridge for "Vogue," but its popularity gave no indication of decreasing. For the old people it was a sentimental revival; they were delighted to see their unmanageable children returning to the songs that mother sang, or dancing the polka, however badly. The young people, for their part, welcomed it as a novel and amusing cult; it became vulgarised, commercialised, in short—what it is to-day, when even the theatre managers of Montmartre are compelled to supply their chorus-girls with the encumbering, but easily detachable, crinoline.

Mr Strachey was, of course, in the vanguard of the movement, and in 1918 he astonished and delighted the "reading public" by his first attempt at historical biography. The success of *Eminent Victorians* was instantaneous. Mr. Asquith referred in his Romanes Lecture at Oxford to "Mr Strachey's subtle and suggestive art"; Mr Squire, in *Land and Water*, described the biographies as "certainly equal to anything of the kind which has been produced for a hundred years," a safe enough remark, for it seems doubtful whether anything quite like them had ever been produced. The critics seemed to vie with one another in welcoming this spirited revolt against Victorian hagiography. *Queen Victoria* (1921) definitely established Mr Strachey's reputation, it was "a monograph," said the *Manchester Guardian*, "that skims as powerfully and beautifully as an aeroplane

## SCRUTINIES II

from cover to cover.” Mr Strachey’s other published work, with the latest and devastating exception of *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), has not enjoyed any noticeable popularity, and is comprised in an introduction to a story by Mrs Inchbald (1908), an outline history of French Literature in the Home University series (1912), a volume of miscellaneous essays, *Books and Characters* (1922), and the slightest of essays on Pope (1925).

While Mr Strachey has not escaped adverse criticism, the fact that it has come mainly from the pens of Anglican and Catholic theologians has served to enhance his reputation as a rebel and to obscure the more important criticism which historians and authorities on prose style have most properly levelled at him. Mr Smyth’s attack, in the *Criterion*, was very refreshing: the criticism was acute, the invective deadly; but, in denouncing Mr Strachey, as it were, from the pulpit, he was inclined to show too priestly a bias and deny Mr Strachey the least virtue. The best he could say about *Eminent Victorians* was that it is “a competent rehash of four standard lives with a little supplementary material.” It was more than competent: (it was an interesting innovation in biographical form and came very near to what Mr Strachey had intended—a work of art.) The readable qualities were undeniable, and were to be repeated with an even greater success in *Queen Victoria*; but even *The News of the World* is readable, and by the time that Mr Strachey has



## LYTTON STRACHEY

exploited his tricks in *Elizabeth and Essex* not only has his style deteriorated beyond belief but the blemishes of his earlier works have become increasingly obvious and irritating.

The trouble is that the evil Mr Strachey has done will live after him; for the majority of the "reading public" he has emerged from Bloomsbury with all the inexplicable authority of a second Mrs Markham, and we all know that Mrs Markham's historical judgments were as completely and persistently accepted as her moral truths. The difference is that where Mrs Markham indulged in excessive praise and denunciation, Mr Strachey turns to superfluous ridicule.

It would not matter if Mr Strachey was primarily concerned with historical truth, which is after all an essential basis to history or biography; but he merely utilises it to serve his "point of view," and has no scruples in distorting it to obtain what he might consider a work of art. André Maurois expressed pleasure that Mr Strachey could be an exact historian as well as an artist, but M. Maurois is a biased judge: he has similar weaknesses. The fact is that when Mr Strachey borrows "for a moment the wings of historic imagination" there is no knowing into what cloud-castles they will lead him. | No would-be historian has been more completely exposed than Mr Strachey in Mr Arnold Lunn's *Roman Converts*. Mr Lunn conclusively shows how the author of *Eminent Victorians* adapted Purcell's *Life of*

## SCRUTINIES II

*Manning* to suit his theatrical needs, and made not only "the worst out of the evidence" but deliberately altered it. How exact a historian he can be is illustrated by the effrontery with which he dramatised an incident mentioned in Wilfred Ward's *Life of Newman*. It may be remembered that in *Cardinal Manning* the curate of Littlemore was passing by the church when he noticed:

"an old man, very poorly dressed in an old grey coat with the collar turned up, leaning over the lych-gate in a flood of tears. He was apparently in great trouble, and his hat was pulled down over his eyes, as if he wished to hide his features. For a moment, however, he turned towards the Curate, who was suddenly struck by something familiar in the face. Could it be——? A photograph hung over the Curate's mantelpiece of the man who made Littlemore famous by his sojourn there more than twenty years ago; he had never seen the original; but now, was it possible——? He looked again, and he could doubt no longer. It was Dr Newman. . . . 'Was it not Dr Newman he had the honour of addressing?' he asked, with all the respect and sympathy at his command. 'Was there nothing that could be done?' But the old man hardly seemed to understand what was being said to him. 'Oh no, no!' he repeated, with the tears streaming down his face; 'Oh no, no!'"

Mr Strachey's source describes Newman, not alone but accompanied by Father St John, revisiting Littlemore. Newman's emotional nature was not unnaturally affected by reawakened memories, and when the curate invited him to make some visits in the village he declined. "Oh no, no!"

## LYTTON STRACHEY

was his reply to the invitation, which incidentally he afterwards accepted, and saw among others Dr Crawley, with whom he "had a long chat." Mr Strachey makes the visit clandestine and unaccompanied, suggests that Dr Newman was not only disguised but denying that he was Dr Newman ; creates in fact his own fantastic caricature of a reasonable incident so that he may round off his chapter in that cheap theatrical way which was once the monopoly of sensational fiction.

In *Eminent Victorians* we can see several other of Mr Strachey's irritating habits in embryo. There is, to begin with, what Father Ronald Knox might have called the "Lyttonismus." It consists in taking some historical incident about which there is no evidence (for at the best of times Mr Strachey can do with a modicum of original research) and allowing his imagination to suggest the lacuna. For instance, when Manning was received by the Pope, he mentioned it quite briefly in his diary: this, says Mr Strachey, is "very significant." This is a perfect example of the "Lyttonismus"; it is, indeed, so significant as to be the secret of Mr Strachey's method, which appears to be a kind of retrospective thought-reading. Again we already see him being too dependent upon forced contrasts and grotesque paradox to heighten the effect of his characterisation. His insistence on the ridiculous makes "losing one's faith," which must be rather a serious emotional crisis, like "the

## SCRUTINIES II

loss of a heavy portmanteau " ; while Keble and Pusey are made to dance upon " the tight-rope of High-Anglicanism."

In "The End of General Gordon" we see Mr Strachey at pains to convey the complexity of human nature and affairs, becoming positively entangled in the novelty of his discovery. He "catches a vision of strange characters, moved by mysterious impulses, interacting in queer complication, and hurrying at last—so it almost seems—like creatures in a puppet-show to a predestined catastrophe." These philosophical flights are repeated in a description of Gladstone: "Could it not then be said of him with certainty that his was a complex character? But here also there was a contradiction. . . ." Such passages have very rightly been described as "banalities."

Queen Victoria is clearly accounted Mr Strachey's *chef-d'œuvre*, and is the only example of Mr Strachey's peculiar art at its best. The conquest of Mr Strachey by Queen Victoria has become a commonplace; as Mr Smyth says, the impression is that the author came to scoff and remained, if not to pray, at least to kneel. The spectacle of Mr Strachey kneeling before that august Queen is by no means surprising: he had already, unconsciously perhaps, lapsed into some of the eccentric mannerisms of her letters, in spite of his smirks at her literary shortcomings. "Really to mean every word you said, when you repeated the Athanasian Creed! How wonderful! And what enticing and mysterious

## LYTTON STRACHEY

vistas burst upon the view! But, then, those vistas, where were they leading to? Supposing—oh heavens!—supposing after all they were leading to——!” There may be some excuse for that queenly, if ironic, phraseology in *Eminent Victorians*, but listen to these sentences from the essay on Pope:

“What a relief to have escaped for once from *le mot propre*, from subtle elaborations of diction and metre, from complicated states of mind, and from all the profound obscurities of Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot! How delightful to have no trouble at all—to understand so very, very easily every single thing that is said!”

The sentiments and style in this piece of pure criticism are a tribute to Mr Strachey's mimetic qualities. Can it be that he is a painful example of the nursery warning: “You'll grow like that” in these literary impersonations of Queen Victoria? Surely it was enough to understudy Mrs Markham.

Quite a number of the people who are ecstatic over Mr Strachey's fearless interpretation of Queen Victoria can never have read Sir Sidney Lee's capable, if official, biography. Sir Sidney Lee's book is no larger than Mr Strachey's, yet it is more exact, more comprehensive, and not unreadable. Handicapped as he was, the author told most of the truth, or, at any rate, enough of the truth to amuse people who do not require their sniggering done for

## SCRUTINIES II

them (for Queen Victoria was too good a joke to be overdone). Some of the plain statements of Sir Sidney Lee are as suggestive as the covert jeers of Mr Strachey, and in no wise can so just and sober a biography be accused of "hagiographic celebration." "The Queen's artistic sense," we read, "was not strong. In furniture and dress she preferred the fashions of her early married years to any other. She was not a good judge of painting, and she bestowed her main patronage on portrait-painters like Winterhalter and Von Angeli, and on sculptors like Boehm, whose German nationality was for her a main recommendation." . . . "The sketches with which she occupied herself late in life exhibited no great skill." . . . "She was not well read; but she emulated her husband's respect for literature, and took a serious view of reading as an amusement." . . . "The Queen dressed simply and without much taste." . . . "It was not Queen Elizabeth's mode of rule that offended Queen Victoria: it was her lack of feminine modesty. It was not the Stuarts' method of government that appealed to her: it was their fall from high estate to manifold misfortune. Queen Victoria's whole life and action were, indeed, guided by personal sentiment rather than by reasoned principles." Compare this with Mr Strachey: "Amid all the softness, the deliciousness of unmingled joy, all the liquescence, the overflowings of inexhaustible sentiment, her native rigidity remained."

## LYTTON STRACHEY

It is the difference between the pen of a distinguished biographer and the pen of a historical novelist, whose psychology may be as false as his prose is precious.

In *Queen Victoria* Mr Strachey tells us little that we did not know before, but he has been ingeniously selective in blending interesting facts and fascinating scandals with his own "dark imaginings" in the best manner of the higher journalists. On such subjects as the Queen's unpopular behaviour during a visit to Paris, a suppressed fact which has been partially revealed in the recent edition of Lady Augusta Stanley's *Memoirs*, he is silent and unhelpful; he is too busy endeavouring to extract an amusing paragraph from the Queen's little dog. As in *Eminent Victorians*, his stage-sense regulates the appearances, movements, even the make-up of his characters. The iron hand of the producer only allows Palmerston to make a dramatic first appearance in 1851; Sir Robert Peel is forced to "dance a pathetic minuet" before the Queen; it is all Mr Strachey can do to prevent William IV, "a bursting, bubbling old gentleman, with quarterdeck gestures," from performing a hornpipe. Again we have the pretentious platitudes: "Whatever else he might be, one thing was certain: Lord Melbourne was always human, supremely human—too human, perhaps." "To do good! What nobler end could a man scheme for? Yet it is perilous to scheme at all." The same portentous wonder at human complexity: "King

## SCRUTINIES II

Leopold and his counsellor provide in their careers an example of the curious diversity of human ambitions. The desires of man are wonderfully various; but no less various are the means by which those desires may reach satisfaction; and so the work of the world gets done." The same alliterative preciosity: "... escorted by a glittering galaxy of kings and princes, drove through the crowded enthusiasm of the capital." And in a passage, too lengthy to quote, on the aspirations of the Prince Consort, there is moralising as intolerable as the last century could produce.

Before surveying that amazing compendium of Mr Strachey's faults, *Elizabeth and Essex*, it may be as well to notice what seem to be two of his main preoccupations—the absurdity of old age, and what Mr Smyth has called "an almost pathological obsession with the sexual parts." We have already mentioned the curious presentation of Dr Newman's senile hysteria. But that is by no means an exceptional instance. There may be some excuse in exploiting the eccentricities of Lady Hester Stanhope in her decline (about whom, of course, a complete and excellent biography had been written by the Duchess of Cleveland), but, then, there is Florence Nightingale, "propped up by pillows," murmuring "too kind, too kind"; the principal doctor in the Crimea "lost in the imbecilities of senile optimism"; Lady Bacon "who, frantic, tottered into extreme senility," "gibbering"; Lord Melbourne, "sinking



## LYTTON STRACHEY

into unconsciousness and imbecility"; George III, "an aged lunatic, completely impervious to the impressions of the outer world"; Elizabeth, "a haggard husk." Among others, Lord John Russell "dwindled into senility," Lord Derby "tottered from the stage," while the unfortunate Beaconsfield, "worn out with age," becomes "an assiduous mummy." If his aged people die of some particularly distressing and loathsome malady Mr Strachey is even more delighted. He revels in death-beds, indeed in beds of any sort provided that they are "full of bugs and disasters."

With regard to Mr Strachey's second obsession, it is interesting to recollect a remark in the essay on Pope. "There are passages in the *Dunciad*," he observes, "which might agitate Mr James Joyce. Saxon words by no means pretty cover Pope's pages; and some of his pages are among the coarsest in English literature." The spectacle of Mr Strachey affecting to blush behind his Victorian fan compares ill with the stream of suggestive vulgarity which runs through *Elizabeth and Essex*. One hazards that Mr James Joyce would be more appropriately shocked at the latter work, although not in the way that Mr Strachey might expect. There might be some excuse if Mr Strachey used Saxon words, but he approaches sex not like "the nameless scribblers who deface the walls of public lavatories," but with all the simpering *nuance* of a female novelist who has to suggest more than she dare say outright. Occasionally

## SCRUTINIES II

his maiden modesty goes a little too far, but is saved by the merciful intervention of the traditional dots. "*Manhood—the fascinating detestable entity, which had first come upon her concealed in yellow magnificence in her father's lap—manhood was overthrown at last, and in the person of that traitor it should be rooted out. Literally, perhaps. . . .*" And Ireland

"where ragged men gambled away among each other their very forelocks, their very . . . parts more precious still."

When wishing to be somewhat more subtle on this absorbing subject Mr Strachey, of course, uses his complexity gambit and hints at the mysterious paradox of sex: "*. . . the flaunting man of fashion whose codpiece proclaimed an astonishing virility, was he not also, with his flowing hair and his jewelled ears, effeminate?* And an almost unbelievable passage on Elizabeth:

"*. . . her whole being was suffused with a lasciviousness that could hardly be defined. She was a woman—ah, yes! a fascinating woman!—but then, was she not also a virgin, and old? But immediately another flood of feeling swept upwards and engulfed her; she towered; she was something more—she knew it; what was it? Was she a man?*"<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to compare an imaginative passage on "Voltaire and Frederick" in *Books and Characters*: "*. . . it was a monkey that he had to deal with. But he was wrong: it was not a monkey; it was a devil, which is a very different thing . . . a devil—or perhaps an angel? One cannot be quite sure—for amid the complexities of that extraordinary spirit, where good and evil were so mysteriously interwoven, where the elements of darkness, etc., etc. . . .*"

## LYTTON STRACHEY

Mr Strachey finds abnormalities very necessary to his characterisation and the perfect type for his art form should be, if it were possible, a psychological hermaphrodite with homosexual tendencies and some species of physical deformity. One imagines that Heliogabalus would make him excellent copy.

As we have remarked before, the irritating blemishes which might be overlooked in the earlier works now burst into a rash across *Elizabeth and Essex*. The style has deteriorated to the point of fluent illiteracy, and primary mistakes in grammar and sense are not merely easy to discover but difficult to avoid. Some, even, would pass as instances of the schoolboy "howler." We are told, for instance, how

"the horns of a fearful dilemma were closing in upon the unfortunate Lord Deputy"; and about Tyrone who "had seduced the sister of Sir Henry Bagenal, had carried her off and married her, in spite of her brother's teeth."

(Her brother sounds like one of the "four out of five" in tooth-paste advertisements.) On one page we find him writing the best journalese about "King Hal's full-blooded daughter," then lapsing later into the "Tudorbethan" period jargon of third-rate film-scenarios, as in his description of the young men at court: There was

"the stately Hatton, so comely in the galliard; there was the handsome Heneage; there was de Vere, the dashing King of the Tiltyard. . . ."

## SCRUTINIES II

We find sentences so obscure that they must quite often pass for brilliance, as in his description of Robert Cecil:

"Yet, perhaps, in some quite different manner, something, sometimes—very rarely—almost never—might be done."

And in his description of Francis Bacon:

"affection, admiration, exasperation, mockery, he felt them all by turns, and sometimes, so it seemed, simultaneously."

We find *clichés* appearing now mechanically and frequently; no noun is safe from the withering embrace of its attendant adjective: "sinister interpretation," "smiled sardonically," "hectic hero," "hideous fiasco," are a few Sunday newspaper headlines from a list which might be amplified beyond boredom.

Historically *Elizabeth and Essex* shows a corresponding decline. In *Queen Victoria* Mr Strachey managed to keep his taste for speculative psychology within bounds, or at any rate to make the thought-reading passages (bad as they often were) subordinate to a narrative which was readable and had a certain form. In *Elizabeth and Essex* he dispenses with form and facts; history has become far more fascinating now that he can write it 'out of his own head.' When he turns away for a moment from his "medley of human circumstance" it is now only to pronounce some historical untruth, as when he says that the rivalry of the old faction round the Cecils and the new round Essex "was the essence of the political situation until the close of the century," or to

## LYTTON STRACHEY

devote a disproportionate amount of space to the story of Ruy Gomez, or to interrupt unnecessarily with a snippety criticism of John Donne.

Let us as an *envoi* to *Elizabeth and Essex* consider the word "preposterous," a keyword, as it is, to Mr Strachey's method and the touchstone by which he makes his people "alive ridiculous and dead forgot." To him everything is preposterous: he talks of "preposterous perquisites and malpractices"; he makes William IV rush about "doing preposterous things in an extraordinary manner"; the Prince Regent is to him "a preposterous figure of debauched obesity"; his Lady Stanhope on her death-bed is "inexplicable, grand, preposterous"; cooking arrangements are "preposterously inadequate"; Macaulay suffered from "preposterous optimism"; Elizabeth is a "preposterous, obstinate old woman"; the world itself is "preposterous" to Mr Strachey. He started his biographical life Creevey-like by emulating "Clio's defeat of pomposity." Not content with plucking his dead lions by the beard, he plucked their tails, and, in his later exuberance, what he would call their "very . . . parts more precious still"; but he must be excused; he was only making the creatures preposterous. It was part of his biographical stock-in-trade which required a "point of view."

I shall undoubtedly be accused of the grossest prejudice in ignoring Mr Strachey's virtues. I have, it is true, deliber-

## SCRUTINIES II

ately ignored them, and for the simple reason that they have been in everybody's mouth for quite a decade. My object has been to correct the uncritical praise of "bright young people" of every age, and to counteract what has seemed to be an almost unchallenged acceptance of Mr Strachey as a biographical historian. It would, however, be hypocritical of me to deny that *Queen Victoria* gave me great pleasure, that I have not admired so excellent a piece of narrative as the description of the Oxford Movement in *Eminent Victorians*, or so skilful a characterisation as that of Francis Bacon in *Elizabeth and Essex*, or the admirable way in which Mr Strachey recounts a scandalous story. Unlike Mr Smyth, I can even find humour that is not "sniggering vulgarity." As a writer of historical fiction Mr Strachey has undoubted ability, but he is little more of a historian than was Harrison Ainsworth. His contribution to biography has been psychological rather than material, and I hazard that future generations will find his work so dated that they will only read it as an amusing fashion in early twentieth-century literature. As a stylist he may be described as the worst example of the Bloomsbury School of Prose; we have only to read Mr Harold Nicholson's biographical criticism or compare Mr Strachey's articles in the *Nation* with those of Virginia Woolf to understand that.

Finally, let us rid ourselves of the idea that Mr Strachey is the *enfant terrible* of the twentieth-century renaissance;

## LYTTON STRACHEY

he is much rather the aunt of the Victorian revival. When we gaze on the masterly portrait by Henry Lamb of Mr Strachey posed by the largest of windows in a chair decently draped with a shawl of the last century, his faithful umbrella within easy reach, and his bearded face in spiritual repose yet not unconscious of the two genteel figures which are making their way across the garden background, presumably with the latest gossip, we feel that Mr Strachey was not being "preposterous" when he wrote:

"Though we may be no longer in the least romantic, are we not still, I hesitate to suggest it—are we not still slightly Victorian?"

CHRISTOPHER SALTMARSH.





Nine

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Nine

VIRGINIA WOOLF

*by*

W. EMPSON

SHAKESPEARE was like Nature; we have been saying it for three centuries. There were more echoes in his work than he knew; he wrote from his Preconsciousness; any work in hand formed a world he was living in, so that he could find his way about in it as if by habit; any of his stones may have been made bread, and repay turning. Novelists have seldom been called Nature in this sense; at any rate they have not been commented on in such detail; and by way of showing that the same claim might be made for Mrs Woolf I shall try to pick up, turn in my hand for the moment, two quite small stones from the road to the lighthouse, till they catch the light, and are seen to be, if not bread, at least jewels.

Mrs Ramsey feels tired at the beginning of her dinner party.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

“ . . . the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it; and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper.”

Watches don't beat up to three, they beat up to two, or four in pairs. Before calling this a harmless small mistake, however, one must consider an earlier passage. James has just gone to bed; she feels at peace over her knitting.

“Not as oneself did one rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles), but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse—the long steady stroke, the last of the three—which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself especially to one of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke.”

The Lighthouse becomes a symbol of energies at the basis of human life, which support and exclude the understanding; Mrs Ramsey sets herself going like the Lighthouse to sustain her party, and it is for this reason that the pulse is like a flame.

## SCRUTINIES II

Or one may say that the Lighthouse has at times been the symbol of reason and male power of setting large-scale things in order (for it is in sight of the Lighthouse that Mr Banks and Mr Tansley go and talk politics on the terrace after dinner, as if they had gone on to the bridge of the ship to take up their bearings), and it is then with a sort of feminist triumph that it becomes a symbol of Mrs Ramsey. The complex working of her symbols continually involves devious motivations of this kind; one must remember with some alarm (thinking of feminism) a moment in Jacob's room, when Betty Flanders, that good and generous woman, remembers in passing how she did not like red hair in men, and how she had the cat castrated that was given by one of her admirers.

The other example is more controversial; it comes in the second part of the Lighthouse, when Mrs Ramsey is dead and time is passing in the empty house. (The War is mentioned two pages later.)

"Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence. Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro."

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

Some people, when you tell them that this patch is of rare excellence, say that it is not true; that a shawl, especially only one fold of it, does not roar; perhaps even that this is a neurotic cultivation of hyper-sensitivity for hyper-sensitivity's sake. The image in any case speaks very truly about such small domestic changes, startling both because apparently uncaused and because of the gulfs of time that surround them; but it is relevant to the shawl for a reason you have to remember; because of what Mrs Ramsey said when she put it there. Cam was frightened of the boar's skull in the night nursery, so Mrs Ramsey wound her shawl round it and said how lovely it looked now:

"it was like a bird's nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes. . . ."

It is only if you have remembered this fancy that you realise with how terrible an irony it has come true. Mrs Ramsey is dead and the house empty; even her most domesticated and personal piece of matter has become monstrous and inhuman, like a mountain, like matter in astronomy. But you have had to remember the words for a long time, and it seems as if Mrs Woolf herself was not so much remembering them as finding her way about the book as if by habit; it is this sort of small correspondence, used so often, that makes up a full and as it were poetical attitude to language such as would gain by an annotated edition.

## SCRUTINIES II

A more serious objection, I think, can be brought against the sentence about the mantle of silence weaving things into itself. Mrs Woolf can show very brilliantly how the details of her characters' surroundings are woven into their moods; this is an important part of a novel, and what I have just called her poetical use of language is the best way of doing it. But here the whole point of the situation is that *no* character is in the room; what is eerie about the sounds is precisely that they are *not* being woven into anybody's mood; and the sentence seems to have the falsity that comes from always using a single method. As long as this sort of method is being used dramatically, to show how a character felt, it is excellent if only because it is true; people's minds do work like that; it may really be the only way to deal adequately with motivation. But when it is being used to show merely how Mrs Woolf is feeling about what she describes the result is not always formal enough to be interesting. One thing reminds her of a lot of others, and the story is held up while they are mentioned; but one feels that the reasons why she thought of these things at the moment of writing are not part of the book.

When the shawl made her think of a rock it was, I believe, part of the book, for the reason I have given; but such a method makes extraordinary demands on the author's sincerity; he must be living in his work very completely if he can indulge in free association and be sure that it will

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

be relevant. Of course you may say that an author must always attempt this condition, regardless of consequences; this, I take it, is the main doctrine of surrealism, but it has an air of putting the cart before the horse. A novelist's wit (of which Mrs Woolf has so much) is likely to carry its own setting and explanation, but his personal poetry is not reliable in the same way.

It is necessary in talking about Mrs Woolf to consider these problems of form, because her solution of them is so closely connected with her choice of subject; if in her later novels she treats them high-handedly it is not so much from indifference or undue concentration as from a change of emphasis. I shall look, for example, at the way she makes a novel stop.

*Night and Day* and *The Voyage Out*, if one thinks of the earlier ones, and respectively with marriage and death; these, of course, are the traditional, and might seem the only reliable methods. But for stopping *Mrs Dalloway* these ways would be no use, because of the particular sort of person whose functions and modes of thought are being described. For the person now in the centre of the stage is a sensible and highly sensitive married woman, not concerned to lead the life of independent intelligence, who is the sun of her world, who acts as clearing-house for the emotional needs of her household, who is always intensely aware of the mood of everybody in the room, and who

## SCRUTINIES II

frequently does not listen to the conversation. Such a person has, in a sense, renounced her private drama, so that one does not wish it to be brought to either of these climaxes. For one thing, we are only shown the day of Clarissa's party; the map is on too large a scale to include the coast as well as the central towns. *To the Lighthouse* is a story about Mrs Ramsey, but in a sense her death is a minor incident brought in to show how her influence lived after her; things centre round her in the third part just as continuously, with just as little natural climax, as they did in the first. You might indeed say that it is hopeless to look for an orderly plot about such a heroine, because the things that are interesting about her make a plot irrelevant. And yet it is a mistake to suppose that you can say even those things in a novel without a plot.

Mrs Woolf's later style is very beautifully adapted to the requirements of this subject; so much so as to attack very directly the problem of motivation. Indeed I think it is for this that she will chiefly be remembered; in this administrative but domestic setting, by the very structure of the sentences, we are made to know what it felt like for the heroine to make up her mind. Of course in itself this is not new; it is the main business of a novelist to show his reader, by slow accumulations, all the elements and proportions of a decision, so that the reader knows how the character felt about it; but Mrs Woolf, so as to be much more



## VIRGINIA WOOLF .

immediately illuminating, can show how they are at the back of a decision at the moment it is taken.

We arrive, for instance, with some phrase like "and indeed" into a new sentence and a new specious present. Long, irrelevant, delicious clauses recollect the ramifications of the situation (this part corresponds to the blurring of consciousness while the heroine waits a moment to know her own mind; and it is here, by the way, that one is told most of the story); then by a twist of thought some vivid but distant detail, which she is actually conscious of, and might have been expected to finish the sentence, turns her mind towards the surface. From then on the clauses become shorter; we move towards action by a series of leaps, each, perhaps, showing what she would have done about something quite different, and just at the end, without effort, washed up by the last wave of this disturbance, like an obvious bit of grammar put in to round off the sentence, with a partly self-conscious, wholly charming humility in the heroine (how odd that the result of all this should be something so flat and domestic), we get the small useful thing she actually did do.

Most of the important things for a critic to say about Mrs Woolf have been said by herself in *A Room of One's Own*, and centre round a peculiar attitude to feminism. For instance, she says there that woman novelists must be expected to do something entirely new in describing the mental attitudes of women, and their relations with other

## SCRUTINIES II

women, which male novelists do not know about. This seems a large claim; surely Richardson knew how women talked when there wasn't a man in the room; and when you have said, as Mrs Woolf does say, that every complete author must be spiritually hermaphrodite, you seem to have quelled this aspect of the sex war as vehemently as you called it into being. But her best work is certainly illuminated by this notion; in particular, it has a sort of submissive sensitiveness to immediate circumstances (helpless sensitiveness, one might say, except that it is just this quality that improves them) which gives her work both the delicacy with which she can seize on a shade of domestic atmosphere and (so as to raise the formal questions I am talking about) the peculiar evanescence of her designs as a whole. One might also put down to this a concentration on to domestic details as dramatic; Mrs Flanders, for instance, not knowing what to do with her dead son's boots; but again it is no use saying it could only be done by a woman novelist. Shakespeare is full of details of this sort, which would be humorous if they were not terrible.

Not, by the way, that he would have used the detail as a means of ending a long work; there is a sort of self-consciousness in the way it is thus thrust upon you as peculiarly good, and you have to decide it is peculiarly good if it is to make a satisfying ending at all. Still, there is no doubt about the finality of the situation; the end here is Jacob's

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

death. The end of *To the Lighthouse*, though much more arbitrary, is as satisfying, and leaves one remembering the whole book, partly by the unifying and mystifying effect of the symbol, chiefly because there is nobody left at the end about whose future behaviour you feel immediately curious. On the other hand this is almost shockingly untrue of *Mrs Dalloway*: most of the book has been leading up to what happens just after the last page. Of course Clarissa did not allow the situation to become melodramatic; if you thought she would Mrs Woolf is snubbing you. But I do not know how she carried it off, or what effect it may not have had on Peter; and even if I ought to, I feel the snub is a harsh one. Certainly the book stops (like a dance tune) at one of the possible stopping places, at one of the minor apotheoses of Clarissa; but so far as one has any sense of finality it is for more or less arbitrary reasons. The party for which she has prepared all through the day of the book is over; the shell-shock case is dead; and he has been connected with the main story in some degree since she has heard of him from Sir William Bradshaw. None of these outweigh our curiosity about the meeting of Clarissa and Peter.

The influence of the Chekov short story, I think, has been misleading in England; Chekov can afford to stop in the middle of a conversation because you know how it would go on. He is hopeless about his characters; they will never do any better; and one stops in the middle as with a final

## SCRUTINIES II

gesture of despair. But a novel in which the characters are capable of dealing with many different situations must stop either when they are dead or when they will from then on have to deal with different situations, and have brought to some order the ones they were dealing with before. So that once you abandon death and marriage the sea is uncharted. For instance, Proust's great novel, you might say, could not stop, because the descriptions of motive were too minute and the interconnections too many; it rolled on by its own weight to end in a rather cumbrous series of universal reconnecting generalisations. On the other hand, Mrs Woolf's early short stories—*Kew Gardens*, for instance—use what may be called the Vase of Flowers method; things seen in the same mood are described together, and there they are; two lovers and a slug; so you stop. This seems inadequate, whether derived from Chekov or not; the range of interest (identifying oneself with all the characters and so forth) in the crudest melodramatic story is much greater than the range of interest (mainly contrast and correspondence) in a vase of flowers. Indeed the impressionist method, the attempt to convey directly your own attitude to things, how you connect one thing with another, is in a sense fallacious; it tries to substitute for telling a story, as the main centre of interest, what is in fact one of the by-products of telling a story; it tries to correlate sensations rather than the impulses that make the sensations interesting;

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

even tries to define the impulse by an accumulation of the sensations it suggested to the author. Even those delicate interconnections on which the impressionist method depends (those two I considered at first, for instance) need a story to make them intelligible, and even if Shakespeare (since I have dragged him in) could afford to abandon himself to these delicious correspondences he had first to get a strong and obvious story which would be effective on the stage. I think myself, at any rate, that Mrs Woolf's most memorable successes come when she is sticking most closely to her plot.

Still, of course, the trouble about sticking closely to a plot is that in that case (for the more interesting plots) you can't deal adequately with motivation; Defoe's method only worked because his characters were undomestic people in dire need of money, so that their motives were fairly plain. All one can say against the wilful and jumping brilliance of Mrs Woolf's descriptive passages is that, as part of a design, they come to seem unsatisfying; however delicate and brightly coloured they seem cut in low relief upon the great block she has taken for her material, and even when you are sure that some patch is really part of the book you often cannot (as you can in my two examples) see why it should be. Of course her methods catch intensely a sense of period, of setting, of the immediate person described; are very life-like, in short; and I do not know how far it may be due to

## SCRUTINIES II

just this quality; to the fact that so many of her images, glittering and searching as they are, spreading out their wealth of feeling, as if spilt, in the mind, give one just that sense of waste that is given by life itself.

“ . . . the great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.”

“How far that little candle sheds its beams”; but still it is the business of art to provide candelabra, to aggregate its matches into a lighthouse of many candlepower. If only (one finds oneself feeling in re-reading these novels), if only these dissolved units of understanding had been co-ordinated into a system; if only, perhaps, there was an index, showing what had been compared with what; if only these materials for the metaphysical conceit, poured out so lavishly, had been concentrated into crystals of poetry that could be remembered, how much safer one would feel.

WILLIAM EMPSON.

REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW  
OF THE RELATION OF POETRY TO  
SOCIETY

Ten

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW OF THE RELATION OF POETRY TO SOCIETY

*by*

GILBERT ARMITAGE

THE present generation is not deficient in courage. But that is not the only virtue. Don Quixote was courageous. What we, in common with the Spanish knight, appear to lack is judgment or prudence. While our willingness to accept and face unflattering conclusions of science or philosophy is deserving of praise, our too easy acquiescence in them, or at least in their ultimate implications for human life (which is not the proper sphere either of science or philosophy), is equally deserving of censure: and the credit due to our courage is diminished by the unnecessary nature of our fears. Mr T. S. Eliot, perhaps the most nicely attuned and articulate critic of our time, has diagnosed this



## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

failing in his essay on F. H. Bradley. He writes: "In a philosophy like Bradley's the points at which he *stops* are always important points." The majority of modern philosophers, he implies, do not know where to stop; and as a result their philosophy, "though infinitely more scientific and technical" (than Bradley's), "is, for the most part, crude and raw and provincial." Literary criticism has reflected philosophy. It has affected a pseudo-scientific vocabulary; it has attempted to comprehend distinct but inevitably contingent spheres of inquiry, and through over-emphasis of some, and neglect of other equally important, data, evolved the most fantastic and untenable hypotheses; it has got right away from literature and from experience. The only conclusion to be drawn from much of it is: *La littérature est impossible. Il faut en sortir.* (But literature is impregnably fortified in experience. It may be impossible to analyse it into sufficiently simple component parts, which, added, do not fall short of the original given; indeed it is possible that critics, like philosophers, would do well to know when and where to stop; but it is certainly ridiculous for us, deluded equally as Don Quixote, to remain immobile and impotent, complaining, with however lofty resignation, that we have not even windmills to tilt at.)

(A great many modern critics are, either directly or indirectly, concerned with the problem of the relation of

## SCRUTINIES II

poetry and of the poet to society. This is obviously an important, one might say a key, problem. The term "society" admits of various interpretations. By definition it is the antithesis of the individual; and it can be extended so as to include every other individual but the one in question, without consideration of distance either in space or time; or it can be contracted to denote lesser aggregates, united by more particular bonds, as of race, period, domicile, wealth, birth, privilege, or talent. Consequently tradition, the spirit or temper of the age, philosophical or moral ideas, either in a diffused or an esoteric form, forms of political or ecclesiastical organisation, and indeed all external conditions whatever which may conceivably be held to affect the production of poetry, may be here classed together under the heading social. The questions to which criticism addresses itself in this connection are then: How much, if at all, does each or any of these affect the writing of poetry? and if so in what way? The answers arrived at by particular critics are unfortunately not always as disinterested as they might be (even allowing for the inevitable "human factor"), being in many cases vitiated by the desire to improve poetry by prescribing a panacea rather than merely, by elucidation and comparison, to discover more about it. Some writers have been led on by this improper though seductive ambition to simplify unduly the scope of their inquiry, either by identifying poetry with social conditions or, in reaction

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

against this, by denying categorically any commerce between the two./

The first of these positions is more often implied than stated, (but it is not less insidious for that reason.) Perhaps its most familiar expression is in the belief that poetry must "interpret the spirit of the age," and in the false deductions derived from it, tending towards the substitution of a temporal for an æsthetic criterion in assessing poetry. When unequivocally stated the fallacy is plain. A good poem is more than, and only incidentally, a social document. And further, a good poem remains a good poem for societies totally different from the one it was originally written for. This is at any rate a more probable and a more useful assumption than its opposite, the application to poetry of the doctrine of change or the flux, so justifiably, even if loosely and somewhat over-voluminously, attacked by Mr Wyndham Lewis. Ultimately similar, but temperamentally opposed to the Time school (as Mr Lewis has dubbed it), is the Traditionalist school. The first is, according to Mr Lewis, communist, collectivist, intuitionist, Bergsonian, romantic, and atheist:<sup>1</sup> the second Tory, individualist, intellectualist, Aristotelian, classicist, and catholic.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless we read in *Time and Western Man*: "The catholic criticism of modernity is as irretrievably 'historical'

<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps devotees of Professor Alexander's emergent god.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mr Eliot's credo: A Royalist in politics, a classicist in literature, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion.

## SCRUTINIES II

as the doctrine of Spengler." Mr Lewis has said it. Traditionalism is equally a time-cult as zeitgeistism, and from the point of view taken in this essay it is just as one-sided: a poem is not a good poem *because* it is in any tradition, although it is very probable that a good tradition will assist a poet to write well.

Trotsky, one would suppose, represents all that Mr Lewis, that self-appointed hammer of conventional revolutionaries, would detest. As a man, however, it is more likely that Trotsky excites the admiration of our redoubted individualist. His views on literature, whether one agrees with them or not, are on an infinitely higher plane of intelligence than we are accustomed to expect of our own public men—it is unlikely, for instance, that he would have "discovered" Mary Webb. It is even possible that Trotsky's political preoccupations have helped him to avoid some of the extremist pitfalls into which not a few purely literary or æsthetic critics have fallen. Naturally enough he holds that a very intimate and direct relation exists between poetry and society, which for his immediate purposes in *Literature and Revolution* means the present political and social regime of Russia. The writer, he says, must accept the revolution or cease to exist. This, of course, might be taken as a warning against the very personal dangers attendant on offences of an entirely non-literary character, but later remarks forbid this limited reading of his intention. His thesis is that good writing

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

is impossible unless the writer is "at one with his epoch"; to which is opposed the "passive, contemplative, philistine, romantic" attitude of the so-called Changing Landmarks group. He will have nothing of a "self-sufficient æstheticism" or of "all the nonsense about art being independent of social life." That is certainly uncompromising, and, when allowance has been made for particularity of the writer's aims and the circumstances under which he wrote, and discretion exercised in the elucidation of his terms, quite good sense. First he does *not* say that all poems fulfilling his conditions will necessarily be good poems. On the contrary he says explicitly that there can never be any strictly Proletarian art: the most it can be is a preparation for a non-class art (the Marxian analogy is here pressed a little too far). Then one must ask, What does he mean precisely by "at one with his epoch"? There are two interpretations neither of which, I think, he would repudiate, but one of which we, in our less abnormal environment, are bound to reject. It is the political. But while we should hesitate to say that a poet's chances of doing good work were diminished by reason of his being a radical, a republican, or in some way antagonistic to the existing institutions of his country; while we should not think there was anything perilous in his being at variance with the sentiments and opinions of the majority or the most powerful of his fellow-citizens; while indeed we should probably have

## SCRUTINIES II

lower hopes of him if he were not in both instances a rebel; we do nevertheless find that, as a rule, the good poet has a *way* of feeling and thinking in common with the most intelligent and sensitive minds of his time, shared as language is necessarily shared, and put, as language is, to individual uses.

So much can be established empirically. Can we hit upon a theory that will afford a more satisfying explanation than mere coincidence? We must obviously start with certain assumptions as to the nature of poetry. They will be of a moderate, tentative, and common-sense kind, and might indeed be accounted truisms, did not some critics (notably those who believe in the utter non-reciprocity of poetry and society), with a great show of penetration and ruthless logic, deny them. Let it be assumed, then, that poetry which had no correspondence with human life (if such could be written) would be meaningless, boring, and without value; or to put it more familiarly, if less precisely: the material of poetry is human experience.<sup>1</sup> One or two irrelevant but inevitable objections can be answered at once by some slight expansion of the terms of the proposition. Assuming further the impossibility of paraphrasing a poem without *entirely* changing the meaning, it is impossible to equate the poetic with the content value. Nor is it necessary to do so. The generalising method of science is not capable

<sup>1</sup> Cf. I. A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 14-18 and elsewhere.

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

of a complete description of anything; and therefore, even though the scientific and the poetical descriptions of a thing may differ, it by no means follows either that the poetical description is wrong, or that it is not a description at all, but merely a word pattern, or—a point I shall return to later—that it is not a description of the same thing. Moreover, the value of the poetic, as of the scientific, description lies in the precision of its correspondence to the object: the difference between the two being that in the second the words represent, by their dictionary meaning alone, certain classifiable aspects of the object; whereas in the first the words, by means of order, sound, allusions, associations, rhythm, etc., as well as dictionary meaning, represent as nearly as possible the *whole* of the object. They may be further distinguished in that the apprehension of the scientific description is wholly inferential, and of the poetic largely immediate; or, to use Newman's terminology, the first is a notional and the second a real assent. Now to-day, owing in part at least to the spectacular advance and consequent prestige of science, we have grown to distrust the process of real assent, and to rely exclusively upon inference, tending to regard the latter as the only test of reality, and dismissing the former as illusion. The inferential mode has too, by a curious confusion of mind, come to be regarded as alone hall-marked by the approval of reason. The result of this state of affairs, since real or immediate assent is an

## SCRUTINIES II

innate faculty in man, is a tendency to make an unnatural separation between it and its correlative, notional or inferential assent, the first being entirely excluded from life and the second from poetry, to their common detriment. From this exclusion we get "pure" poetry. In England there is, Miss Laura Riding who says:

"The material with which an author works is not reality but what he is able to disentangle from reality: in other words I think the identity is rather of purity and unreality. . . . In every person there is the possibility of a small, pure, new, unreal portion which is, without reference to personality in the popular, social sense, self. . . . When this self has been *isolated* from all that is impression and impurity of contact in an individual, then a 'thing,' a work, occurs, it is discharged from the individual, it is self; not his self, but self."

Here "notional" has become "real," and "real" has become "unreal." By "unreal" she means something very "pure" indeed. She means that residue which remains after everything "real" has been subtracted: how small and how pure the residue is the extent and inclusiveness of the real sufficiently demonstrate. Not only society but the whole intellectual field—inference, generalisation, classification—belongs to the real. The philosopher, she says, is "the enemy of the unreal." Socrates was displaying this enmity undisguisedly when he asked:

"Supposing, Meno, I had asked you what was the nature of a bee, and you had told me that bees were many and various,



## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

what would you have answered me if I had demanded of you further whether you called them many and various in respect of their being bees; or whether they differed not in this respect, but in regard to something else as beauty or size or other thing of like kind incidental?"

A bee that is a bee because it is sufficiently *like* other bees to be put in a class with them is a "real" object (because it is a generalisation). In "unreality" there are only "things," no similarities, no classes; but all things, as Newman says of the natural world, "are unit and individual and are nothing else." They have not even names, for, according to Mr Bertrand Russell, "all words, even proper names, are general, with the possible exception of 'this,' which is ambiguous." And so Mr Cummings is guilty of gross aberration from the "unreal" principles he appears to be professing, when he writes in the Introduction to his rather whimsically entitled volume, *is* 5:

"It is with roses and locomotives (not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney Island the fourth of July the eyes of mice and Niagara Falls) that my poems are competing. They are also competing with elephants and with El Greco."

If his poems "compete" with elephants they must be *compared* with elephants, and to be compared they must have something in *common* with them, and also, to make the comparison at all interesting, they must in addition have points of *difference*. | Anyhow where has he got his

## SCRUTINIES II

names from? But maybe it is only Mr Cummings' rather childish fun.

It appears then that the purely unique and particular—the “unreal”—is of its nature *inexpressible*. On the other hand, although a poem is unique and particular, and therefore, words being general, no equivalent word or words can be found for it, yet none the less a poem consists of words. I do not propose to attempt a definition of the creative as opposed to the informative use of words. Let the dilemma, if it be one, stand; since the people least likely to be bothered by it are poets. I shall, however, infer from it that poetry is not the monopoly either of the intellectual or of the non-intellectual part of man. Newman says of a dogma of faith:

“To give a real assent to it is an act of religion; to give a notional, is a theological act. . . . Not as if there were in fact or could be any line of demarcation or party wall between these two modes of assent, the religious and the theological. As intellect is common to all men as well as imagination, every religious man is to a certain extent a theologian, and no theology can start or thrive without the initiative and abiding presence of religion.”

I think there is a close similarity between the psychology of faith here expressed and the psychology of poetry. Poetry I take to be, like the act of faith, a function of the whole man. It is easy to see that no act of faith, no belief, can be stable until it is, to some extent at least, justified and related to the rest of experience by the intellect: without intellect there,

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

would be no memory, no time, no space, nothing but now and here; and, not recognising time and space, I am entirely at their mercy, having no choice but to assent to and believe whatever is now and here. And it is equally plain that the intellect by itself is incapable of faith. The intellect cannot create; its action consists in the application of a method to phenomena presented to it through other channels of experience: and a method is impotent without something to work on. Indeed, so far as faith is concerned, no one is likely to dispute the interdependence of the religious and the theological modes. But why, it might be asked, should the same apply to poetry? To which I should first reply that before appreciating (giving a real assent to) a poem one has to construe it, that is, assent to it notionally. The question of the production of poetry is less simple. Miss Stein once said at a meeting in Oxford that a poem already existed in the mind of the poet before being written down, by which we must take her to have meant put into words, not merely transcribed on to paper. This is, I think, an inevitable deduction from the doctrine of the "unrealists," who should, to be quite consistent, not overdo the job by writing their poems at all. Since, however, there seems to be a universal preference for written poetry, it is perhaps safer to equate the completion of the poem with the completion of the writing. Miss Stein's explanation of the practice of writing (and incidentally of publishing,

## SCRUTINIES II

which is irrelevant here) was, if I remember rightly, that it was an amiable weakness of poets to desire to be read and understood, not unmixed, she admitted, with a little harmless vanity. Is not her view somewhat inadequate? A far more satisfactory explanation is afforded by the older conception of poetry as the organisation of experience; for it is by the use of words, standing for ideas, and arranged in specific Order, that experience is organised; and it is by organisation (an intellectual act) that power and stability are added to the vividness which Newman calls characteristic of the immediate, the object of real assent. It is from perception and organisation in integral co-operation that creation comes.

It would be possible to sum up much of what has gone before by saying that poetry is intolerant of dualisms but thrives on antitheses. Passion and law, subject and object, intellect and intuition, general and particular, doubt and certainty, individual and society—poetry must keep to a knife-edge between these pairs: if it plumps for one or other of them, it perishes; and if it plumps for both, postulating two eternally distinct and unrelated realities, then it likewise perishes. Take for instance Miss Riding's dualism of self and society (unreal and real), some of whose defects we have already had occasion to go into. One part of the man, according to her, is entirely shut out from participation in the production of poetry: the part through which he

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

takes cognisance of other human beings, of society. Her attitude may therefore be justly described as one of qualified solipsism, and, so far as poetry is concerned, of entire solipsism. (She regards poetry with satisfaction as "perhaps the only human pursuit left still capable of developing anti-socially.") But solipsism is definitely one of the points at which wisdom has always bidden the speculative intelligence to *stop*; and since it is repugnant to experience and common sense, I contend that it is also repugnant to poetry. For poetry, it has already been premised, depends for its validity upon its correspondence to life; if it claims a monad-like co-reality with life, it is merely a "self-sufficient æstheticism," meaningless and boring. In conclusion I think that poetry rests upon a putative, though not a dogmatic, monism, in which it is itself included; for it is inherent in our nature to assume there is but one reality; and this assumption it is to which we owe all stimulus to order and form and created beauty. It is this perception, doubtless, that has driven some of our poets to adopt the dubious synthesis provided by the Christian religion. The key of the Absolute is not the indispensable pass to Parnassus.

It is now time to return to the original problem and attempt an explanation of why a good poet is likely to have a way of thinking and feeling in common with the most intelligent and sensitive minds of his time. As we are considering the poet in his special function, it is unnecessary

## SCRUTINIES II

to pay further attention to the fact that one sensitive and intelligent mind, the poet's, is likely to react to a similar environment in a similar way to other minds of the same quality: what we are interested in is rather how far this common way of thinking and feeling is necessary or beneficial to his production of good poetry. In other words, is Trotsky right or not? I think he is, for the following reason. Since the poet must live in a society (without a society there would be no need of language and hence no opportunity for poets), he cannot help being aware of that society. Now supposing he has not a way of thinking and feeling in common with that society or with part of it, its members will seem to him to belong to a different kind of reality from his own; and the fissure between him and his society will inevitably produce a corresponding fissure within himself—the dualism we have found to be incompatible with poetry. To-day we are all more or less in this condition. And it is this, I think, that accounts for the timidity, the effort, the querulousness, the thinness of all the best modern poetry. Compare, for instance, practically any modern poem with one of the profane poems of Donne. One could probably enumerate a good many qualities common to both. Donne is minutely interested in his own sensations and emotions, and studious to describe them exactly as they are; he is sceptical and full of speculative curiosity; his poetry abounds in conflicts: all of which are characteristic also of the poets

## REMARKS ON THE CURRENT VIEW

of our own time. And yet there is a difference that cannot be adequately accounted for by the alteration of environment between then and now—a toughness, a solidity, a reality, or what you will, possessed by Donne and apparently unrecoverable, at any rate unrecovered, by us. Was Donne then “at one with his epoch”? In the sense adopted above, I suggest that he was; that his sense of life was strong enough to enable him to face conflicts or antitheses without being driven into a sterile dualism: and it is, moreover, worth noting that his poetry was not at all affected in this respect by his entry into the Church. As to ourselves, there is encouragement to be derived from the fact that the essential difference between, say, Donne and a modern poet is not environmental but psychological (conditions may be said to influence the “aspect” of poetry but not its essence: no conditions are of themselves inimical to poetry); and since, as has been suggested earlier, these psychological disabilities are in a large degree due to hasty and imprudent thinking, we have at once a responsibility and a hope.

GILBERT ARMITAGE.





NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

## Eleven

### NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

*by*

BRIAN PENTON

DESPITE all the gibblegabble about it, is there really any problem of the novel?

First, what do I mean by reality, what can anyone mean now that Einstein and Freud have given a new direction to all analyses of mind? Can I define it as something external to all my neuroses, an immutable quantity demanding from you, from me, from the Bishop of Birmingham descriptions that would differ only in the literary quality of our styles? Certainly not. How then can I conceive as anything more than an abstraction a realistic novel which presumes to convey with detached dispassionate attitude images of a world outside my nervemesh and on the basis of that conception distinguish between Joyce and Firbank?

I know that for some the rhythms of tragic emotion tauten

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

life to a pattern of anger and fear and perilous lust-hungers and that they see Cleopatra staring insatiably at her image in their eyes and hear the repercussions of Helen's first kiss behind the sucking tongue of any kind sweet drab. But for that same drab, a simple wench, reality will be only a hazy weave of bilious tastes, sunshine, the warmth of bed, silk-knickers, and all things connected with men who have fair moustaches. That is not the world for which Birmingham beautifully extemporises prayer nor is it mine, nor is mine Birmingham's nor yours. Who sees with me the transcendent nobilities of booze and young girls and finds the earth a brothelparadise of ecstatic madness? You poet and you kind old lady and you simple-minded anarchist and you you vulgar little red-mouthed bitch each husk yourself in your little exclusive image of life, incommunicably far from me. And none knows life as Apollo sees it glancing down upon a tangle of bald heads, bowler hats, and bottoms.

The point is simple. Each of us gazes into a peculiar facet of reality and we know it not as a thing detached from us but as a fluid warmth or bitterness in the blood. The universe is as intimately localised in ourselves as a bladderstone. Isn't it obviously a fake then to pretend that we can remove ourselves into emotionless vacuums of scrutiny and create there a mosaic of life outside?

Dreiser is the man who of all the realists makes me feel that I am talking sense. For those in whom life has flattened

## SCRUTINIES II

the will, leaving no power to project at its lunacies the gay contempt of laughter that is our abiding resource against all of earth's malice, Dreiser naturally seems a most scrupulous realist because he extracts from his material an insidious poisonous despair. Life is real, life is earnest! Inevitably the crumpled ego will believe that and feel misery, depression and despair in literature as overtones of authentic reality, perceiving in our delight the hysteria of the pitifully irresponsible, village idiots knowing not what they do. From this approach we must accept the second book of Pantagruel as a gay but irrelevant thing beside Dreiser the serious novelist.

The question is: does he press into my blood sensations of this world from which he has deliberately detached himself? Does he give me the full flavour of the sweat and the tumult? No. It is there, I know, but I look down into the turmoil through swathes of glass that insulate all feeling. I know every detail of Carrie's life appearance habits and surroundings. A complete catalogue. But I do not *feel* her. She remains abstracted from me. She exists I am sure, she moves, breathes, kisses, sleeps, but no warmth of her warmth melts my body and outside the tentacles of my nerves she is as unrealised as the women for whose eyes I fumble on the street.

I step into the Satyricon, sucked from my own subtly exclusive plane of reality into Petronius' crush of rounded,

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

warm, bloodstuffed men and women. I run in the dirty streets of that Rome trembling at the name of Quartilla who always kisses with a baggy mouth licking my chin. Through the smell of Trimalchio's good food and good wine girls stink urgently in my desiring nostrils. Though, unlike Dreiser, he has meticulously elaborated few details of this world I know every detail, for Petronius' gusto and contempt have burned them on my blood. What he felt I feel as far as my nerves are strong enough to carry such a fury of happiness.

But if you think that after all this is scarcely a criterion since the *Satyricon* is just the sort of life I am always lusting for I will give myself up to the Dixhuitième Arcadia of Daphnis and Chloë where Longus defines as vaguely as a fancy on clouds the properties of spotless goats, clean hay and unsuppurating dung. Could there be a remoter world? But it hangs on the ends of my nerves. I live in it weeping for Chloë—and myself—when I remember that girl who used to take me behind the bougainvillea at the back of the garden every afternoon—vainly because I was awkward and foolish and thought girls wore bows at their necks to keep their dresses shut.

Petronius' own feeling for it dissolves the *Satyricon* into my blood but Dreiser scrupulously feeling nothing shows me Chicago only as a city of implacable strangers further away than America, further away than the moon, immeasurably far away, outside my senses.

## SCRUTINIES II

Only an emotional statement of life can be real, of life emotionally realised either in anger or delight. The more passionate the statement, lyrically or sardonically—Longus or Petronius—the more real to me what it states.

Of course Dreiser does not exhaust the realistic novel. Joyce has found and developed possibilities in it and he has tried to vitalise its abstractions by relating every statement directly to the blood of his characters and giving the dimensions a valid existence in the form of the novel. But for all that I cannot help coupling him with Firbank in some discerning subconscious association of their characteristics. What a monstrous fantasy the Dublin of Bloom and Daedalus is. Having recovered from the weariness of climbing the dung-hills of Joyce's diarrhoetic irrelevance I look back on Bloom's day and see a rushing nightmare of more than Scheherazadian lunacies. It is an opulent dream. Anything might happen there without surprising me. He conquers the intractable dimensions by lifting Dublin to a new point of relativity where all local values cease to exist. There plausibly the Lord Mayor of London might go mad and turn into a pantotechnicon making love to the Virgin Queen, and after changing to an iguana and half an elephant swim out to sea singing "Rule Britannia." Such things would be unremarkable in the Dublin of Mr Bloowowhowomb.

Joyce tried to be a realist but, such is the inconsequentiality of matter, reality collapsed under his fingers into a million

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

mad distortions beyond the power of Merodack-Jeanneau to conceive. He did, however, create a convincing world; not an abstract of a world but, according to my definition of reality as sensation in the blood, a world I can feel and smell. He creates all the dimensions of a convincing world but, regrettable lack, puts nothing in them. Somebody, I think it was Jolas in *Transition*, called Bloom falstaffian Bloom, but far from having the remotest affinity with Falstaff Bloom, I'm so lonely Bloom looking at meekmorning Bloom kidney-chewing by miriamcuckolded Bloom by Henry Flower Bloom, isn't a character at all. He's nothing. Joyce made a mistake in believing that there was a difference, a distinctive difference, between the mass of sensations that flow through the semiconscious of a bus conductor and those that are the only content of a bishop's mind. To create character, or rather to convey character, he would have to do more than merely set these down in their diffuse incoherence. Selected they might faintly unentertainingly etch the outlines of an individuality, but Joyce scorns artificial selection. Character is vividly developed, however, only by showing the individual's peculiar conscious or semiconscious effort to justify or ennoble or escape or realise in selfconsciousness the processes in the back of the mind.

Joyce has made one definite contribution: he has conclusively reduced all the pretensions of the realistic novel to absurdity. If he had written a parody on it he couldn't have

## SCRUTINIES II

done better than Ulysses. He has finally destroyed too any surviving hope in the Zola-Dreiser-Moore-Hardy-Flaubert conventions, for at least he was a serious artist trying to make a serious artform of the novel and to say what he had to say with devices not too shockingly artificial. He deserves nearly all the respect we can spare. Instead of borrowing the old matrices Flaubert had left for moulding the fluid material of life into a neat ingot, rounded, smoothed, stamped, and weighed to neat proportions he did try to define a form in which he could show life sprawling in every direction, ceaselessly interlocking, entangling, changing its centre, its balance, scattering, coming together again—eternally blindly yet interactively restless. He did not drive a channel through this turbulence and in tidy but artificial isolation examine life damned momentarily for observation around a central theme and character. He understood the relativity of minds caught in the reverberating consequences of action but impotently divorced on oblique axes of personal equation, and when I revive from the boredom of following Bloom's mind through the minute trivialities of his unexceptional movement I do feel that life has been roaring in my ears. But it is all so vague while I read and doughy.

What I protest against is the consuming dullness of the book, a result immediately of its interminable vomit of irrelevant sensation-associations and further back, fundamentally, of Joyce's failure to centralise his material. I



## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

applauded him a moment ago for having avoided the convention of centralisation; now I reprove him for the worse fault of having not enough will to bind the material in a dynamic unity without the aid of the convention he discarded. He is helpless. He loses control of the material which washes everywhere about his impotent hands that promised to canute control the sea and rescue the landscape from the abomination of dykes. The cliffs of his formidable pretensions crumble till at last no form remains, only a froth of waters bewildering to look upon. Joyce is the weak man who tried to do a big job. In his heroic debris he deserves applause.

A simpler, more easily definable, break of will destroyed form in Conrad after he had mastered it completely in *Nigger of the Narcissus*, *Typhoon*, and *Youth*. I cannot imagine a more exasperating bit of patchwork than *The Arrow of Gold*. That prologue and the lovemaking in a footnote. It is maddening. Such execrable craftsmanship cannot be reckoned slovenliness in Conrad, for no one ever bled words more painfully. The construction of *The Arrow of Gold* collapses because a base ambition to become a great and noble literary man and a gentleman after the manner of Lord Palmerston's time had deflated his will. He funked making Donna Rita give herself to George at the psychologically correct moment—after Ortega has been battering upon the door. He funked control of his own silly ambitions. Would

## SCRUTINIES II

a gentleman after the manner of Lord Palmerston's time, would an honourable and respected literary man, friend of Mr Maddox Hueffer, do such a thing? No. Obviously he had constructed the work to attain its pyramidal apex at that moment of conflicting greeds, fears, and desire. But gentlemanly, honourably he abstained, self-identified with George, and put it in a footnote. Of course the work collapses round this point, this point of Conrad's funkdis-integrated will, priderotted will, will of an English gentleman.

The same terror in a more violent and sickening form disembowelled Dickens, who might have blasted the slowly hardening crust of bourgeoisie values in England with guffaws of rabelaisian contempt and the more intricate contempt of passion. Here is one to make you vilely enraged with all the decencies of a Good Man's conscience. What cowardly evasions, sneaking self-deceits, grovelling degraded morality. And out of it all what an irrevocable collapse. Dickens, who might have built greater than petronian edifices of delight, feared the nemesis of social disdain that waits upon all who want to cry Joy, Joy in words and therefore in action too and always crawled back to snotty snivelling debaucheries of pain ashamed of the lusts that threatened to tear him out of the rotting earth he inhabited. It is almost incredible that a man who could perceive the agonies of Rosa Dartle, sense the delicate nervenet under the soft flesh of Lady Dedlock, stare past the mirroring eyes of Edith Dombey, feel the thwarted

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

angers of Bradley Headstone, pick Mr Venus out of a world of dun, blank, murderous dullness, discover Mr Boffin and Silas Wegg and Tony Weller and Quilp, shudder in the presence of Denis, and appreciate the refined disdain of Wrayburn—it is incredible, horrifying, that such a man could bog himself in the defæcations of sentimental pity for lunatic asylums, poorhouses, cripples, and small boys beautifully dying.

Dickens could.

*Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* all define that collapse of form at the point where will baulked the job of going forward with a lyric of earth or a tragic repudiation of the values imposed upon it by people like the man who loved *David Copperfield*. The momentary contempt he felt for those values when he created Lady Dedlock, when he saw the world as a drunken world around Mr Pickwick evaporated in a sudden sweat of fear and he hastened back whining to dirty dreams of death—the only one since Shakespeare who could have grasped falstaffs and cleopatras out of the great wash of life.

How he whipped himself to virtue, lugubriously ecstatic in the masochistic anguish of pity. When he was creating Little Nell, weeping on to the pages before him, he wrote to a friend saying that he feared to go out lest he should become cheerful.

## SCRUTINIES II

He paid for it anyway in leaving behind not a single thing that is organically unified—form developing unobtrusively out of the material it binds. Even *Our Mutual Friend*, his most spacious effort, the first attempt since Shakespeare to forge a complete image of life with intricate subterranean labyrinths of dark emotion and loud bellowings of delight, collapses monstrously in a jumble of the most filthy sentimentalities ever suppurated in a decent citizen's mind. Here he comprehended the whole scramble of existence, from Bella Wilfer to Lucy Hexham, from Wrayburn to Headstone, from Mr Boffin and Mr Venus to Mrs Wilfer. Colossal. Since Shakespeare it was one of the few enterprises that built on a grand scale crescendoes of laughter and passion in form wide enough to carry the interwoven relativities of action—those crisscrossing ripples, stirred along the surface of life by inconsequential gesture, that wash us at last onto dim contrary shores of anguish or happiness. But again and again the Atlas of his will crumbles to a paltry social conscience, wormeaten by pity, a healthless thing: Dickens the malefic metamorphosed suddenly to Dickens the Good Man who loved the stench of pain and suffering ugliness.

I dwell upon Dickens because I feel that he defines the point of disintegration in the novel. He who might have synthesised all the elements into a form capacious and flexible enough to hold the most violent emotional conflicts, the most delicate lyricism, the most dynamic orgies of laughter and

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

given it an æsthetic validity it did not possess beside such an absolute as the Shakespearean drama, for example, blasted what little unity it had into the wretched muddle we find about us now. Before Dickens the novel had pretensions. Fielding had carried the petronian tradition to a more complicatedly gay analysis of man's only greatness, the godlike pursuits of lechery and booze. Scott revolved about an understanding of savage brutality and wrote well as soon as the murdering began. Emily Brontë found that same cruelty ingrown to tortuous darknesses of repression and produced a work that has in English no equal for its restrained but pitiless expression of passion futilely tangled to a knot of pain. Jane Austen wrote banalities to which time and a generation of desiccated æsthetes have given a subtlety she did not possess, and George Eliot preceded Hardy with thorough but unmitigably dull pictures of English life and landscape. Thackeray, obliquely amusing, exposed himself with a partiality for such unbeddable little vixens as Becky Sharp and for the debilitated Newcombes. But paltry and pallid as some of these were they did make an effort to consolidate a form significant æsthetically. Even Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë and Mrs Gaskell and Miss Edgeworth asked the novel to bear less than the ignominy Dickens was to impose upon it when alarmed by the company of the Dickens who made friends of Quilp and Denis and Rosa Dartle he drew across that doubtful person's face the mask of

## SCRUTINIES II

worthy Mr Podsnap and began to worry about the spanked bottoms of schoolboys and the uses to which orphans could be put.

From this moment the blood of Scott and the belching heroisms of Fielding found no room in the novel, which had fallen into the evil company of sociologists. Dickens it was—Dickens the flatulent figment of the very worst abominations of Victorian conscience—who led us to a generation of cater-wauling social critics. In another time they would have spilled into tracts and works unambiguously labelled their evangelical dissatisfaction with a world that still, thank god, has in it things to revolt the souls of Lord Mayors, but after Dickens one needs, to write a novel, not even a limited circulation of blood nor a knowledge how human beings love and drink and fight, but only a vision about improved sanitation and the awful things that go on in public lavatories. Via Dickens' social conscience the novel arrived into a moribund civilisation, that took these and problems of comparable magnitude seriously, as a highly developed implement of propaganda. What a splendid megaphone for the whines of Bennett and Wells and Shaw and all others tormented by a world not yet quite sterilised to precision, sobriety, and a geometrical pattern of rational living. The serious right-thinking of Sinclair Lewis, pained to protest by the discovery that Babbitt and Gantry squirm obscenely within his horizons rather than inspired by the spectacle of so much

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

entrancing lunacy to praise of the prodigal god who conceived them, has now a dangerous weapon for deodorising the earth of the only things that make it habitable—its madmen.

Everywhere such people with good intentions dream of a better life. There never was so frenzied a lust for Utopias. Man is losing his grip on the earth because something has broken the connection between the lust-hungers that are his claws gripped in the soil and the consciousness slowly, intricately developed in him by long civilisation. (I shall say a word about this later when I come to talk of the novel of the future.) The immediate result is a complete dissatisfaction with the earth that gives him only stress, agonising disintegration, torment, and no satisfaction. As a natural corollary he yearns after a world where all conflict will be resolved in peaceful rational order. Here we clamour for communism; there for fascism; here for sentimental Rousseau hamlets of simple souls; there for the divine right of kings. But the impulse is universal—a movement out of earth into promising areas of pure light. Everybody believes that it is better to be sane and industrious than drunk and disorderly.

Now I do not say that Dickens is responsible for all this. I say merely that he has reinforced the good conscience of social reformers and turned the novel into an instrument of propaganda for them. If the world is dehumanised of its bedlamic tumult—and only a kind cataclysm killing off all but a few poets and young very vulgar little girls spending

## SCRUTINIES II

that weekend on a high unshakable mountain can save it—the corroder of idiosyncratic values will be not the wheels of Henry Ford, the Press, or the Cinema, but fundamentally the novel, for it is the influence *behind* all these things, the voice of the world's dreamers exciting the world to improve itself.

But the point for this discussion is that if Dickens had faced his job courageously—and that meant facing himself and his own life—I believe he could have constructed the novel into a form of such æsthetic significance and dimensions that it would have remained beyond the reach of fiddling Utopians like Wells and Shaw. Failing, he left it in fragments easily accessible to anybody with a capacity for pulling the strings of a convention and gave to a generation of debilitated intellectuals a readymade creation. The best of his derivatives is perhaps the Compton Mackenzie of *Poor Relations* absorbed purely with character manifested in gentle, genteel humour, the worst that undifferentiable bunch of earthweary social scavengers, serious problem solvers, from Wells to Huxley. Between them they have brought the novel to the last extreme of neat infallible and never unanticipated formulæ.

To me Huxley is the lowest denominator, the most dangerous to a sane man's world of humour and love and drink. He is the type of intellectual whose attacks upon all the things worth living for are most insidious because he



## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

conceals himself—perhaps from himself—behind a respect for them. The disguise is thin. Everything exposes him as one thwarted of the warmth of his own blood and devoted therefore to a dog-in-the-manger defence of the bourgeois paradise where the generative principle will be consummated in a test tube. Rosie (*Antic Hay*), Mary (*Crome Yellow*), Mary Thriplow (*Barren Leaves*) are charming girls. They are charming for many reasons but principally because they climb into our senses warm from kissing. How he despises them. He is always ready to insult them, to show how essentially mean, trivial, false they are, how paltry, fundamentally, their thirst for kisses. He discredits everything about Rosie, even to the way she talks. All she does is contemptible. But Ethel the pure girl, the worse than Dickensian monstrosity of sentiment who sleeps naked all night in Gumbriel's bed without demanding a fulfilled caress, melts the intellectual to a treacly adolescent sadness. Not Rosie but himself he exposes.

Mary Thriplow desiring Calamy puts on a mask of simplicity. He tears it off and shows us below the intricate mechanism of her deceit. Of course she is not simple at all. What a little liar. With savage and monotonous sniggers he keeps snatching the mask for another two hundred pages. Very well: we agree that she is a liar, but that scarcely matters since she is desirable. When he understands this at last his hatred discards logic. He only

## SCRUTINIES II

wants to beat her, blindly to hurt her, puritan like. He says then that she really *is* simple and demonstrates that simplicity is an emotional defect. Well, he can't have it each way. If her simplicity is pathological it could not have been a deceit; if it was a deceit he is lying to degrade her word. So in the end Huxley exposes again not the deceits of Mary Thriplow but his own.

It is upon the women who love that he hammers his indignation, not the less righteous because there is a smirk in it, and because he affects to despise all valuations not the less expository of faith in a higher and nobler world, not the less evangelical. To his hatred of easy kissing wenches add his hatred of the Don Viveur—Mr Cardan and Bedlake. He has only one kind of chuckling tittletattle about them—that they do not exist in a consuming love of life but in a disintegrating fear of death. How he loves to drag them face to face with death, to rub their noses in it. How he detests men who can be warmliving and drunkards. Naturally, since for him whisky is the grand emetic. But when he thinks of Old Gumbriel and Mr Porteus, the poor, white-haired, virginal, devoted scholar, the unearthy one, his sobs choke him, he laughs at the cruel irony of the world with a hollow scorn worthy of Mrs Wood.

All the people who love life he makes slightly pathological—the women half witted, the men tormented by monstrous fears: the decent and ostensibly pleasant creatures are those

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

who despise living because they fear it—Gumbril, Calamy, Ethel. This is not so far from the moral tales of another time. Now the bourgeoisie is intellectual, unable any longer to believe in god and god's moral absoluteness not with the frenzied conviction of their fathers. But their fear remains, the ineradicable spirit of a comfortable herd precariously balanced over the muttering dangers of life. Life is still something they cannot bear—an imperative heat of desire in the blood, of happiness crushing the skull like an eggshell, of things that push them into terrified loneliness. But how can they announce now their hatred of all this, so easy before when they believed in God's word. They have to find a subtle deviation out of the mess. Wells is one; Galsworthy is another; and Huxley the best of the lot. He announces the bourgeois disgust of life in the almost disarming terms of a love of life, and all the time he is showing that life is worthless, a mechanism of mean reactions, not humorously mean but worthless even for laughter. Huxley is the true prophet of bourgeois day dreams.

He has to show life up. He has to disprove all earth values and the pretensions of earth lovers. He is like the men who value our watches in pawnshops, never carried away, always adamantly applying a formula of depreciation. Thus he reduces the novel to a creating machinery of devices. The figures dancing, paltrily horribly, demonstrate his thesis, but they dance, it is easy to see, not of their own volition but

## SCRUTINIES II

of his. Dickens' escape from form and life consummates itself here.

He almost achieved a notably unified form once—in *Antic Hay*, but the effort was too much for his will. First his hatred of Rosie snapped it: he had to poise against the tormenting image of her livid happiness the image of Ethel, dream of a tired intellectual sentimentalist. Then finally everything comes down in a heap around Old Gumbriel and Porteus, all the sardonic laughs crumble into a snuffle of melodramatic pain.

Here the Huxley who felt the charm of Rosie sufficiently to create her and saw in life an endlessly diverting bedlam of crossjangling lunacies collapsed into the serious Huxley who shrieks for an escape out of this hell of disorder and disconnected madness, the frightened bourgeoisie who has gone too far outside the fold. So *Antic Hay*, which began with a promise of form unified in a spirit of delighted contempt, breaks at last into half a dozen fragments of conflicting intention—because Huxley's will could not sustain delighted contempt.

But it is necessary to watch Huxley and his compeers of bowelless intellect projecting their profoundly banal hypotheses of a better world into the vacuums of the novel so that one may come upon Lawrence with the full pleasure of grateful surprise. Of Lawrence it is at least possible to affirm from what he writes that he exists, has blood, stomach,

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

hair on his face, and all other appurtenances of manhood, which is more than one would care to say of most of these tootling pedagogues, his colleagues, who give no impression that they ever performed a human function in their lives. It is impossible to doubt either that he exists in a more than normal exasperation with society, resentful with the resentment of wounded pride and very proud of it too, very self-satisfied to have been snubbed by the squire's sons in his sensitive childhood and to have carried on his selfesteem the large red scar of hate for all squires' sons and daughters. The snobbish desire for social elevation of the schoolmaster's little boy snubbed by the foolish sons of the squire all through his struggling life has been crosschannelled to a selfsolacing contempt for social elevation, and the vindictiveness of a subtle mind works out its long brooded satisfaction by dominating the intimate tender lives of the squire's sons and daughters in the vivid reality of an imagined world. Thus it redeems the pain of childhood's whipped shame, with Birkin's intellectual pitiless goads, with Aaron. The softest and most easily poisoned core of the social being has been festering for nearly forty years till it has become a refined pain sublimated to a dynamic frenzy that fecundates his mind and gathers every energy of every fibre to a concentrated shriek of anger. This is no pusillanimity: it is the only voice in the novel that commands attention to-day.

Lawrence projects a real world. That world and the

## SCRUTINIES II

laughter-shaken island of Nepenthe—antithetical planes of matter—are the only two convincing images of reality in the modern novel. When we have followed his vitality to its springs and found it bubbling from the hatred of squires' sons privileged to go where schoolmasters' sons are forbidden to go let us still be grateful for so much vehemence cleansing in an age of intellectuals thinly shrieking. It is a creative gust, a frenzy that comes out of a world certainly, painfully felt and floods into our minds vivid sensations of that world, strange though it is.

The slowly gathering rush of tormented emotion rising over the barriers of consciousness darkens my mind and sweeps me into a blackness where the pale faces of disintegrating personalities stare madly at me, clutch me for support, fly from my support. Trivial words are heavy with portentous extraconscious connotations to be perceived only in a rare hysteria of intuition.

Lawrence hungering for unconsciousness ends by being the most selfconscious of all moderns. In him introspection is an aching inturned stare. He starts with a world of three dimensions, developed characters, and consciousness and inverts the usual process by washing out the light, washing out the earth, washing out shapes and consciousness into an opaque blur—women crying from the womb of darkness to demon lovers known only as sensation and darkness. But it is not nihilism *he* achieves—only an angry selfconscious-

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

ness, a maddening selfrealisation of the death within his own corpuscles. It is not to the recuperating darkness of the womb that his analyses bring *him* but to the contemplated darkness of decay.

Out of this fantastic frenzy grows a form as concrete as any ever wrought in the novel. *Women in Love* is one of the best constructed of all works of art. Here is no formula for defining character, no convention of approach. I exist inside the novel, privy without *viva voce* stage directions and asides to the heavy significance of every gesture. The dimensions exist as elements of the action and time is a quantity inside that action, not an abstraction I am asked to imagine. In other words, it is a unique artform, not, as the novel has become, a play with extended slabs of description, demanding all the indulgences permitted to the stage.

So we return to my thesis that novelform is a projection from the blood of the creator not a convention—not an external form as the ode is a form and the sonnet and the play. As an external convention it produces only the marionette world of Huxley or the showcases of Dreiser, as outweaving of personal dynamism it produces the taut form of *Women in Love*.

The psychological novel is not something Dostoievsky claps over Raskolnikoff but a form incipient in Raskolnikoff's neuroses and Dostoievsky's. Its close fretful subjective analyses become abstract and preposterous only when

## SCRUTINIES II

imposed upon the less dramatic material of *The American Tragedy*. The intense drama of *Typhoon* naturally germinates an introspective method that becomes maddening only when Conrad forces it over the looser material of *Chance* and *Victory*. How stilted and overcadenced and literary his style is there which seemed before, though its rhythm was exactly the same, so flexible and in its very movement so subtly descriptive. It is impossible to consider form as mere framework apart from the idea it embodies, as an almost arbitrarily chosen vehicle of expression. Form must grow out of the idea, organically develop with each development of that idea, like the husk around the expanding meaty kernel, elastic to its idiosyncrasies, close-fitting, unique. *Tristram Shandy*, *Typhoon*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Wuthering Heights* are perfect forms generated out of their material and inseparable from it, their airy towers suspended from the gusto or passion of the creator.

Therefore it seems—to me—that each novel, existing as an element of the creator's own emotional impact upon life perceived at a certain peculiar angle, will exhaust its method, for every new orientation of life around his variable relativity—that is every new tilt he gives to his unique plane of observation, destroying old perspectives and creating new ones—will subtly change his emotional reaction so that he sees in the same material now delight, now drama, now tragedy, and now only the infinitely inconsiderable antics of dazed ants. The



## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

variations a creator can achieve are unlimited, of course, but depend upon his will to selfknowledge. Dickens might have seen the whole of life from every point of view if will had not collapsed in him and he had been able to see himself. The failure of men like Lawrence to escape from their first projection—he still rewrites *Women in Love*—is not a failure of imagination or a lack of material but a failure of will in the discipline of selfknowledge. He cannot get behind his hurt pride and control its frenzies, releasing his energy for new definition of self.

Since the novel becomes then in the last analysis blood-warmth and bloodbitterness externalised we arrive inevitably at the conclusion that the novel does not exist of all—as art-form in the same sense that say the poetic drama is artform. Metric and other definable conventions at least affirm the immutable common basis of all dramatic verse expression, however different in quality, from Shakespeare to Yeats.

No such external conventions distinguish the novel. I don't think the most industrious earthworming D.Litt. (Oxon.) could discover a principle of affinity that would relate *Daphnis and Chloë*, *The Idiot*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *South Wind*, *Don Quixote*, *Nigger of the Narcissus*, and *The Case of Mr Crump*, and if with peculiar obliquity he were to say that all have chapters, I add *Old Goriot* and *Catherine de Medici*, and if he redouble and say that all have a central theme, I add again *The Satyricon*, and if he protest that all revolve upon an

## SCRUTINIES II

ordered revelation of character I ask shall I add *The Memoirs of the Count de Grammont* and call *Ulysses* by some other name than novel. There is no such thing as the novel: there is only Scott, Fielding, Dickens, Balzac, Rabelais, Petronius, Dostoievsky, Conrad, Hergesheimer; and *The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Tom Jones*, the Second Book of Pantagruel, *The Satyricon*, *The Idiot*, *Typhoon* and *Cythera*.

Of all expressions mind has evolved what we call *the novel*—the projection of personal emotional worlds—is the most intimate to the creator and in the pattern of feeling and spirit it evokes the most unique. For that reason it is naturally the most abundantly coined and imitated. This is the only *problem of the novel*—the external problem of finding creators, not coiners.

Every conquest of form creates the means of destroying form because it gives to slack and weakly intellectual, uncreative, minds a readymade creation. After the triumphs of Fielding, Balzac and Scott, and Dickens' failure, inevitably the novel would be debased by literati and illiterati alike. But the war made the rot more complete by releasing upon mind a muddle of tortuous despairs beyond the power of a tired people to subjugate with delight in earth. Consciousness seeks refuge in categories of pure reason, in abstract form, feeding upon itself Erisichthon-like. Not only must we support the existence of Berta Ruck and Michael Arlen and other concessions to the halfwits of all classes, but

## NOTE ON FORM IN THE NOVEL

suddenly we have no one creating a *novel* that will outlast the day.

What we need is a dynamic mind able to synthesise these tortuous despairs—now inescapably an element of the European mind—with the lust for earth that must be the basis of any attempt to create an image of it. Then perhaps we shall get life back to the *novel* and the smell of life and tumult.

No simple form will be sufficient for the analysis he will have to make of life complicated by the release of ancient terrors, by Freud's and Einstein's contributions to his consciousness. He cannot return to the *novel* where Dickens left it and take up the thread again. He must abandon that conception of one dimensional character on which Mr Boffin and Wrayburn and Molly Seagrim and the Dominie are created. He must search out their marks with a sardonic contempt more sophisticated a thousand times even than Douglas's and find with more subtle appreciation than Conrad's the springs of their passion dammed in the clogged labyrinths of a two thousand years' old fear.

The new *Satyricon* cannot be the old *Satyricon* rewritten in a modern setting: it must be a more complex tangle of ecstasy projected through the lava crusts of this ancient pain. The form, when it crystallises out of the consciousness of a more sophisticated but not therefore less earthy Petronius, will be a pattern as crosswoven as the daily more tangled

## SCRUTINIES II

involutions of life itself, an extricable crisscross of personalities crossmuddled and joy shaking itself free for a more intricate cry of delight.

Let us pray for the man who will perform this colossal integration. The lack of him is the *novel's* only problem.

BRIAN PENTON.

Twelve

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

## Twelve

# THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

*by*

MONTAGU SLATER

### § I

IN his book *Reason and Romanticism*, Mr Herbert Read has a passage bearing on the subject of this essay. "At all great epochs of change and crystallisation," he says, "it is the medium of verse that has hitherto embodied the first and final accents of intelligence." But in the present age the painter and the sculptor have (he thinks) usurped the poet's priority.

"The first formulation of the particular spirit of the Renaissance is found in the poetry of Jacopone; and it was only under the direct influence of Franciscan literature that the plastic arts took on, in Giovanni Pisano and Giotto,

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

the elements of a new conception of life. The priority of poetry seems to hold good for all epochs of Western civilisation up to and including the Romantic movement of the last century. It holds good of later and minor movements such as that of the Symbolists of France and the pre-Raphaelites in England. But of the definitely new conceptions which promise to be distinctive of the twentieth century we find little sign in poetry. . . . There is, that is to say, no adequate literary equivalent in England for the impressive organisation and intellectual content of the modern movement in painting."

This is an interesting generalisation and, if true, it is important. Mr Read, finding "impressive organisation and intellectual content" in Fitzroy Street and Bond Street, looks on with a modest envy surprising in a poet. But he is on debatable ground. The very phrase "the modern movement in painting" is a doubtful generalisation. One thing only is clear in the party conflict: there have been lately a great many painters eager to explain themselves—Marinetti, Kandinsky, Wyndham Lewis, Roger Fry. There needs no poet to come down and tell us that modern painters are talkative. But the real question is not one of theory, but of practice: it is the question whether the theories of æsthetics formulated in the studios have any real value and influence outside.

It is interesting to contrast the poet's optimistic account of the state of the other half of the world of imagination with

## SCRUTINIES II

the less glowing accounts made by painters themselves and writers about the visual arts. Professor Wilhelm Worringer, the German critic (whose important work on *Form in Gothic* Mr Read himself has edited), delivered to the Munich Branch of the Goethe Fellowship some three years ago a paper called "Art Questions of the Day," a translation of which was published in *The Criterion*. It was an extraordinary document of depression. Professor Worringer had been reading Spengler, and his reflections took on a cosmic scope. He began sorrowfully with the *Decline of the West*, and ended hopefully with the thought that there will appear—is appearing—a form of art which shall synthesise the conflict of modern life and which shall be manifested (apparently) by books about the *Decline of the West*. Spengler is omega: alpha is Spengler. Nevertheless, Professor Worringer did succeed in sandwiching between two sentimentalities an interesting, if tearful, account of the present discontents of the plastic arts, and it will be useful at this point to make a quotation from his paper. (It should be noted that when Professor Worringer uses the term "expressionism" he appears to mean, roughly, what Mr Read understands by "the modern movement in painting.")

✓ "Art questions of the day [he writes]—the plural is superfluous. For art to-day there is only one question. . . .

"It is not expressionism that is ultimately in question—that would be a trifling affair of the studios; it is the medium of our intellectual existence as a whole which is bound up with



## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

this question, and many who know nothing at all about art are to-day bankrupt expressionists. . . .

"Decline and fall of expressionism. How did it all come about and why so quickly? We are inclined to speak of it in hushed tones as at a sick-bed, well aware that it is incurable. . . .

"However greedily expressionism may be pushing out its aerial roots in all directions, the space round it has become empty and exhausted and no longer produces any vital nourishing force.

"We know how, in our modern expressionist perception, as in a fine and delicate lens, all the lines of the great expressionisms of the past suddenly met and were focussed, and that in this way, receptively and perceptively—but not creatively—we had a glimpse of what elemental art is. Gothic, Baroque, primitive and Asiatic art, these suddenly revealed themselves—this I think is certain—as they never had revealed themselves to any previous generation. . . .

"Now came the great misunderstanding. The more deeply we penetrated into the world of these phenomena of the past, the sharper became our recognition that the modern repetition of the expressionist drama was after all merely played in the studio, and was possible only on the basis of a more or less avowed fiction. . . .

"Plastic art is no longer inevitable. It is still with us, but socially it has no existence. . . . And painting? Art as wall decoration? The final stage of intimacy of an art that has exhausted its last possibilities of extensity. . . . If there is anything worthy of reverence in the quiet history of heroism in the nineteenth century it is the intensity put into this intimacy. A narrow frame on a wall, a flash of colours, and behold a whole world of emotional vibrations! . . . . In this lies the explanation of impressionism.

"And now occurs the tragic interlude of expressionism. . . . An unprecedented process of overtension began in art. . . .

## SCRUTINIES II

The inner vanity of expressionist endeavours is most drastically reflected in the impossible demands made on the easel picture, the framed picture, this legacy of impressionism. These men sinned against the simple recognition that the framed picture is the ordained form of intimate art, by burdening this poor framed picture with all the demands of an extensive art. And thus people hung on their walls pictures which were accumulators charged to high tension. If behind these pictures which panted after elementality there had been a real elementality instead of a fictitious one, no one could have borne to remain an instant in rooms which were laden with such pictured explosions. But it was so. Because everything was enacted only in the fourth dimension of a mere fiction. . . .

“Of the whole effect there remains a new, and, decoratively, charming and stimulating stroke of artistic handwriting.”

Now Professor Worringer, with his panting pictures and his accumulators charged to high tension, uses language which unfortunately obscures the good sense in his remarks. Most people would agree with him that Gothic, Baroque, primitive and Asiatic art are appreciated now as never before. It has even been maintained that we are living in a period which is comparable to what Watts-Dunton called “The Renaissance of Wonder” in literature. Just as Chatterton, Ossian, and Percy’s *Reliques* led naturally to the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and *Biographia Literaria*, so the rediscovery of the primitives accompanied and was followed by an eager examination of first principles. The result, as might have been expected, was that the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, Alice, and the Dormouse came hand-in-hand into the studio,

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

and their metaphysical tea-party which never stops was for the time being paid for out of the painters' pockets. (Whistler had invited Alice and Company years ago, but they had at that time been busy with Huxley and Mr Blatchford.) The studio population took tea and developed the habit of illustrating arguments on canvas instead of on a blackboard.

It is easy to see how this might be mistaken for a vigorous art movement. After all, as Mr Clive Bell is never tired of saying, we live in a country where the literary tradition has been supreme for centuries. Only let the painter take to writing, or imitate Dr Johnson, and talk and form clubs—then we begin to take notice! The air is so full of talk of "movements" that even such writers as Mr Clive Bell and Mr Roger Fry seem occasionally to lend their authority to the popular fallacy that the badge of the "modern" artist is his odd notion that he has something else to do in the world than to make a faithful copy of Nature. Mr R. H. Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Painting* devotes a disproportionate amount of space to distinguishing the artist's function and the camera's. All these writers prove their case brilliantly. The man-in-the-street is put to shame. But why should such writers turn themselves into elementary school-teachers for that mythical person's benefit?

Perhaps it is because, in introducing with all our parties and "movements" the technique of politics into art, we have

## SCRUTINIES II

submitted to the necessity of educating the electorate and canvassing for voters. The same thing is happening in literature. Mr Robert Graves and Miss Laura Riding have written a sort of elementary school text-book on modern poetry. The explanation seems to be that as soon as arguments about first principles come into fashion a certain confusion is liable to arise. Getting down to rock-bottom may look as though it were much the same thing as writing a sixpenny booklet for Sir Ernest Benn. The child learning to play the pianoforte plays five-finger exercises daily: so, doubtless, does M. Cortot. There is a difference between first principles and first lessons.

Here is an interesting contrast: Mr Wilenski, in writing about the modern movement, finds it necessary to devote tens of thousands of words to the question whether a painter should be a slavish copyist of nature; yet if we look at one of the best examples of academic discussion of this question, we find it dismissed in a few lines. Professor J. A. Smith, in his *Nature of Art*, deals with it thus:

“ And what shall be said of those . . . who teach that what Art makes are imitations, copies, images, semblances of something else? Will any one tell me what Shakespeare made, in what factory he laboured, and where are now the material embodiments of his artistry, or of what originals they are the copies? Is it of the works of art ‘made’ by his predecessors, or of physical objects? *Non ragioniam di lor ma guarda e passa.*”

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

Once you appeal from painting to poetry the quarrel between the slavish copyists and the artists is seen to be of no account—provided only it remains on the level of what philosophers call naïve realism. (As we shall see, there is another level on which it may be thought a fruitful discussion.) At present it seems to have as little to do with art as the vigorous articles Mr George Moore used to write about the finances of the Royal Academy: not without reason Mr Moore scented a scandal. But these are matters for discussion at Westminster. Why else do we pay politicians £400 a year?

The irrelevant discussion between artists and the designers of calendars has been allowed to assume so much importance that it had to be mentioned. Actually, all that has been said so far is that it is no new discovery to say that a work of art has style. That is the first lesson. But while the journalists have been giving first lessons, there has been a discussion of first principles in the studio, and it is this discussion, and not the sixpenny booklet type of misunderstanding of it, that accounts for the distinctive character of contemporary activity in the studios. The most interesting feature of the discussion is that it shows, I think, more interest in æsthetics than in art criticism.

The distinction between these two kinds of talk is not so subtle as it may at first seem. Art criticism treats works of art as ends, as things-in-themselves; æsthetics treats works of art as facts which may uphold or overthrow a generalisa-

## SCRUTINIES II

tion; as particulars which must be submerged in a universal; and as the bricks with which may be built a philosophy. Criticism is concerned with works, æsthetics with faith.

And this special character of present-day thought about art is connected both as a cause and an effect with the rediscovery of what Professor Worringer oddly calls "the great expressionisms of the past," Gothic, Baroque, primitive and Asiatic art. It is easier to get the first principles if you start from the primitives or the Chinese. Baroque art seems even further away to many people—almost as remote as the hobble skirt. If you start from Phidias, or Michaelangelo, there is too much traditional lumber to clear away. It is more difficult to clear your mind of cant. At any moment you might find yourself quoting your governess without knowing it. The spiritually remote epochs are free from this danger. They can be treated as "expressionisms" without any account being made of the civilisations they were invented to express. These ancient art movements, if such they can be called, are admirably unconnected with our politics and our prejudices. They live in the refined air of the museum. You could never quite say that of the art movements which traditionally provided our orthodox models and exemplars.

There is no need to inquire whether the rediscovery of Baroque, Asiatic, and primitive art was more the cause or the effect of our preoccupation with first principles: it is enough to understand that it is both cause and effect, that

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

a Chinese vase will set Mr Clive Bell talking Cambridge Realist philosophy, and that the philosophic enthusiasms of the Clive Bells and the Wyndham Lewis's will set others exploring history for still more remote epochs, will send Mr Robert Byron to Mount Athos and others to Mexico.

### § II

The discussion of first principles has been conducted on certain well-defined lines. Here is an admirable example of one of the more usual openings, taken from the Board of Education's suggestions for drawing-masters:

"About the beginning of the second stage," it says, "that is from the age of eleven, it will be possible to deal formally with what is perhaps the greatest difficulty in drawing—the representation on a two-dimensional surface of objects occupying three-dimensional space. This, as the history of the graphic arts shows, was not entirely mastered even by great artists until drawing and painting had been practised for centuries."

In these innocent sentences can be found texts for all the art quarrels of the century. "The representation . . . of objects"—here are two very difficult words. They must be avoided for the time being. We can avoid them by saying something like this: "The attempted solution in terms of two-dimensional space of certain problems conceived in terms of three-dimensional space." (That might apply equally to Euclidian geometry: both Mr Wilenski and

## SCRUTINIES II

Mr Clive Bell, following Pater, would say "all the better!" Indeed, this gives us one clue already. Your geometrician has to draw his figures before he can prove his proposition. These figures "represent" no known objects, but they are themselves objects.) Here is Mr Wilenski's account of one of the pre-war discussions amongst French cubists:

"These artists, in their technical reaction against illusionist photographic naturalism, made it a point of honour to refrain from any procedure which conveyed the illusion that any part of the picture was farther from the spectator than the actual canvas. The canvas itself must appear to be what it actually is—*i.e.* the most distant part of the physical contents of the surrounding frame. The picture had therefore to be composed of surfaces obviously imposed one over the other; and the architectural relations between these surfaces had to lead the eye back to the canvas, but no farther."

This he maintains was the origin of those curious pictures in which strips of paper were pasted over the canvas and buttons stuck in the midst of the paint.

Mr Wilenski is cleverly avoiding the words "object" and "representation." "The picture had to be composed of surfaces each imposed on the other," he says. If this short-lived phase was, as Mr Wilenski claims, due to the reaction against illusionist technique, then it has almost as little importance as the thing it reacted from. But surely it was not a reaction of that kind at all, but a natural step in the argument which was to lead back to first principles.



## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

From the point of view of these artists, what we call "objects" might quite safely be regarded as convenient aids to the memory of our experience of moving about in three-dimensional space. When the major problems of painting and drawing have been expressed in this way, it is seen to be identical with the problem of sculpture and architecture. Remembering that objects are convenient aids to memory and that the architect is also occupied with similar problems, the cubist painters arrived at the next stage in their metaphysical progress. This is Mr Wilenski's account of it:

"Certain cubists said to themselves: 'The architect does not stand in one place and make his architectural composition a symbol of a single perception of formal relations; he makes his composition a symbol of a formal order discovered by different perceptions of formal relations experienced at different times and in different places. We are architectural painters: we will do the same.'

"Hence those abstract architectural compositions where one part of a violin perceived from the side is placed in a relation with another part of a violin perceived from the front."

It will be remembered that, in the old days of *Blast*, Mr Wyndham Lewis (though he was not in the least perturbed by the earlier problem of whether it was permissible to create the illusion of a space behind the canvas) was very cautious about permitting the introduction of "objects" into pictures, and said that only the greatest artists ought to

## SCRUTINIES II

be allowed to tackle such a dangerous and complicated task as the attempt to represent a recognisable object. And this awe in approaching the object is no new thing. Was it not this very fear which made the older English academic painters teach their pupils to copy the antique instead of taking the risk of going straight to Nature? Thus we find Sir Joshua Reynolds saying:

“The whole beauty and grandeur of art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above the singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind.”

And again:

“It is from a reiterated experience, and a close comparison of the objects in Nature, that an artist becomes possessed of the idea of that central form, if I may so express it, from which every deviation is deformity. But the investigation of this form, I grant, is painful, and I know of but one method of shortening the road; that is, by careful study of the works of the ancient sculptors, who, being indefatigable in the school of Nature, have left models of that perfect form behind them, which an artist would prefer as supremely beautiful who had spent his whole life in that single contemplation. . . . This laborious investigation, I am aware, must appear superfluous to those who think everything is to be done by felicity and the powers of native genius.”

And though the battle of Realist and Idealist has changed its ground since Reynolds's day and “objects in Nature” seems to have become a more difficult conception, there is at least some relation between his theories and those of

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

Cézanne as Mr Roger Fry reports them. Consider this passage:

"He [Cézanne] it was who first, among the moderns at all events, conceived of this method of organising the infinite complexity in appearance by referring it to a geometrical scaffolding. Though it must be remembered that this is no *à priori* scheme imposed upon appearances, but rather an interpretation distilled from them by prolonged contemplation."

I think Reynolds would have accepted the last sentence with very little alteration. We are reminded of Reynolds again when we read of Cézanne's idea "that the artist is the means by which Nature becomes self-conscious." Mr Fry's account of Cézanne's still-life paintings has surely some relation to Sir Joshua's account of the antique sculptors' ceaseless quest after "that central form from which every deviation is deformity." It is useful to quote it here because, among other things, it helps to show the relation between the quest after first principles which we have been describing and the work of the nineteenth-century impressionists.

"Thus, before the still life, put together," says Mr Fry, "not with too ephemeral flowers, but with apples and onions or other robust and long-enduring fruits, he [Cézanne] could pursue till it was exhausted his probing analysis of the chromatic whole. . . . No doubt his idea of colour as revealing plasticity was far from new. The early impressionists were more concerned to seize the full complexity of the coloured mosaic of vision than to isolate and emphasise those indications in the total complex which are evocative of plastic form."

## SCRUTINIES II

They sought to weave across the canvas the unbroken weft of colour which their eyes had learned to perceive in Nature. But this aim could not altogether satisfy such a nature as Cézanne's. The intellect is bound to seek for articulations. In order to handle Nature's continuity it has to be conceived as discontinuous; without organisation, without articulation, the intellect gets no leverage. And with Cézanne the intellect, or to be more exact the intellectual part of his sensual reactions, claimed its full rights."

We have come back to the representation of objects, but with a difference. Mr Wilenski describes the next step by saying that the cubists began to notice that Cézanne succeeded in "including representational elements in pictures the subjects of which were as formal as the Parthenon," and they set out to do likewise, striving "to make their perception of the formal order underlying Nature rival that of Cézanne." So we come to what Mr Wyndham Lewis calls "Cézanne-ism" and "Nature morte-ism." This stage of the argument is best illustrated by the works which Derain is now painting in France; Mr Duncan Grant, and the other members of the London Artists' Association, Mr Meninsky, and the young men of the London Group, in England.

We have got to the point of admitting even "imitation" of a sort. It comes about in this way. Our experience of three-dimensional form is clearly intellectual, or, as Mr Fry says, it belongs to the intellectual part of our sensual reactions. A German, Dr Hermann Bahr, gives this idea a new twist,

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

in his account of what he calls the "inward eye." Thus, if you remember a room, for example, the vision which the "inward eye" of your memory contemplates has some curious properties. It is as though the senses of sight and of touch were synthesised. Some of the people Galton examined when he was writing his famous treatise maintained firmly that when they remembered a room they could see all four walls at once, and Dr Bahr seizes on this point; and, just as Mr Clive Bell does in the more metaphysical chapters of "Art," he endows the inward eye of the painter with a mystic apprehension of solidity and of space. Thus you may now call painting "the imitation of objects in space," if by that you choose to understand the objects of the inward eye in that peculiar sort of space in which memory and imagination move.

### § III

To return to the point from which this essay began it is impossible not to notice that in the midst of an eager interest in the arts of painting and sculpture a deep dissatisfaction prevails. There is a feeling that we have an excellently argued æsthetic and a warm appreciation of the arts of other times and places, but not enough performance to balance them: that our art is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. According to this view painting is academic

## SCRUTINIES II

in the good sense; but to be academic is to be unspotted of the world, and it ought to be asked whether the virtues of the artist and the virtues of the monk are so much alike. It has been said that modern painting is eating its own tail, like an Aldous Huxley novel. A psychologist and a disciple of Adler, who maintains that his master's maxim "dare to be imperfect" is a direct challenge to the spirit of the age, once suggested, as a type of the young modern, a man who brought verses for criticism and said, not, "Does this appeal to you," or "Does this come off?" but "Is this poetry?" And it could be argued that the modern painter with his eternal "Is this plastic? Is it painted solid?" is asking the same type of dangerous question. The centipede was asked which leg comes before which and came to a bad end. Sir Joshua Reynolds's discourses were in their way admirable, but it might be argued that sound æsthetics does little towards producing sound painting; and certainly not many of the students who listened to Sir Joshua produced considerable works of art: the metaphysical arguments for approaching Nature *via* the Greek sculptures can be made to sound convincing, but in practice—as for example in the bad old days of the Royal College at South Kensington—this method of teaching produced deplorable results. It may be asked whether the artist ought not to take more for granted than the centipede? Why not let him take it for granted that he is going to paint solids and make discoveries in three-

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

dimensional space, so that he would have time to occupy himself sometimes with the question of "*What* shall be painted?" instead of his eternal "*How?*"

There has been no attempt to answer this question. It has become tactless to ask it. It is almost as though painters had adopted a theory of pure painting something like l'Abbé Brémond's theory of pure poetry.<sup>1</sup> English criticism has repeatedly demonstrated the failure of this theory as applied to poetry. Mr Read, for instance, suggests as English equivalents of *La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë* such lines as "Now lies the earth all Danaë to the stars" or "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came." Browning's poem, which starts from Lear's Fool's line, has what I imagine a painter would call a plastic quality: but its interest surely lies in the contrast between the "plastic" treatment and the knightly ideas and associations which we were accustomed to see treated fluffily and, in the bad sense, romantically. Similarly, few English critics are content to class lines like "Now lies the earth all Danaë to the stars" or "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan" as magic incantations which must not be critically examined—as, in fact, pure poetry. The effect of such lines seems to be due to the multitude of associations they evoke. And is it not just here, in the examination of words, materials, subjects, methods of evocation, that the

<sup>1</sup> Is there not some resemblance between l'Abbé's ecstasies and those of Mr Clive Bell?

## SCRUTINIES II

function of true criticism, as distinct from metaphysics, begins? What if we ask the painter whether his favourite "aubergines and onions on a plate" can be more properly considered as a solution of the problem of subject, or as an astute way of avoiding the problem? When Picasso takes the next step and paints mandolines and harlequins, is there not a risk of playing with unexamined and uncriticised associations, with half-baked emotions which might be recognised as sentimental if they were less cautiously evoked? Ten years ago Mr Roger Fry, addressing the Architects' Association, complained that refinement and good taste were playing the very devil with our architecture. Similarly, the painter who is ready with unanswerable arguments to defend any step he takes soon becomes adept at covering up his tracks.

It may well be that the over-cautiousness so many critics find in the work of modern painters can be illustrated in a parable from the life of Cézanne. It seems that the father of modern painting was afraid to approach the subject that most interested him. Here is Mr Fry's account of it:

"One cannot doubt that throughout his life Cézanne was violently drawn to the female form as a model. His plastic feeling would alone have urged him to the contemplation of forms so eminently suited to embody his ideas, his love of ample, simply defined volumes. But there can be no doubt that this feeling was complicated in a curious way by his eroticism. This in turn was violently checked by his well-attested terror of women. The conflict produced a curious



## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

inhibition—he simply did not dare to draw from the nude model. From time to time, however, he found models sufficiently deprived of charm to satisfy him, though he was never altogether at ease in their presence.”

I make no attempt to interpret the parable.

The writings of Mr Wyndham Lewis are fully treated elsewhere in this volume. He has ever since the days of *Blast* been declaiming against the self-consciousness of modern “studio art.” In *The Caliph's Design* (1919), a book which his later and more widely read works have overshadowed unduly, he wrote:

“The spirit that pervades a large block—cube if you like—of the art of painting to-day is an almost purely art for art's sake dilettantism. Yet you find vigour and conviction: its exponents Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Balla, for example, are very considerable artists, very sure of themselves and the claims of their business. And so you get the contradiction of what is really a very great vitality in the visual arts, and at the same time a very serious scepticism and discouragement in the use of that vitality.”

Later in the same book, when he comes down to particulars, he has a long section in which he sets out to show that Picasso, who has interpreted for us in turn Daumier, Gauguin, El Greco, Cézanne, and the African carvers, belongs to the class of executants, is a Cortot and not a Bach. Of the other disciples of Cézanne he says:

“I have no fault to find with Cézanne-ism. Any faithful discipleship of that master is sure to be sound art. All the

## SCRUTINIES II

same, Cézanne is such a lonely figure with such a weight of pups about him! ”

Mr Wyndham Lewis has certainly a vision of modern art in the words of our parable “never altogether at ease.”

In his more recent books he has written less directly on the subject of painting. The editor of this volume once compared *The Art of Being Ruled* to *Culture and Anarchy*, and it seems an apt comparison. Just as Arnold found it necessary to turn from poetry to a kind of world *politik*, feeling that the foundations must be set right before there was room for poetry, so Mr Wyndham Lewis feels it necessary to clear Spengler and Bergson out of the way and all the other enemies of that practical painter’s approach to “Nature’s continuity,” whereby, as Mr Fry says, “it has to be conceived as discontinuous, so that the intellect gets some leverage.” He has to rout all those popular philosophers and scientists who think with what Dr Johnson called “the nose of the mind” before he can have a quiet morning in his studio. He says somewhere that all his writings, equally with those of the Marquis de Sade, are devoted to the exaltation of one physical organ, which is, in this case, the eye.

To Mr Wyndham Lewis the problem presents itself as a conflict between the artist who now, as always, is occupied solely with ideas of plastic form (“that central form from which any deviation is deformity”) and the spirit of the age which is more appropriately manifested in M. Bergson’s

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

Time philosophy and the cinematograph. But there are more formidable enemies than his *bêtes noires*, Bergson and Charlie Chaplin and Professor Alexander. We have noted that the modern painter is never tired of reiterating the commonplace that architecture is the Mother of the Arts: but there is a fresh difficulty in this since, in the present age, the central problem of the architect has been stated in new and startling terms. Here is a quotation from a recent article in *The Times Literary Supplement*:

“It is clear that with steel-frame construction and the use of concrete, building—in the sense of laying one brick or stone upon another—with all the complications of design that it entails, is becoming less and less important in architecture. The modern building can hardly be called a building at all, its constructional framework bearing a relation to the architectural effect which is hardly closer than that of the ‘armature’ of a sculptor’s model to the sculptural effect. . . . There is no longer any resistance to the style preferred in the stubborn facts of building materials and the methods of construction deriving from them, and bricks and stones are used only as facing material.”

“There is no longer any resistance . . . in the stubborn facts of building.” Here is emancipation with a vengeance! No wonder art turns academic. It is the only hope. The Mother of the Arts has gone to the Wembley Amusement Park: go and look at the new Egyptian-Temple-Cigarette-Factory at Mornington Crescent if you would know what

## SCRUTINIES II

she can do now she is allowed to go on the spree. Do the artists hide in the studio with the Dormouse and Alice because they are motherless?

Strange things are happening outside, but in the studio and the art gallery the old metaphysical argument goes on. I picked up *The Times* this morning, and in Mr Marriot's article I read this:

"Of late years there has been a tendency to mix up the arts of painting and sculpture to the detriment of both. . . . It is the bad painter who substitutes for painting formal design in three dimensions—which is the proper business of the sculptor."

So we are back at the beginning again.

I have no conclusions to offer. One may note that, as to personnel, the two provinces of the world of imagination are to-day very closely related. One has only to think of D. H. Lawrence, who painted as well as wrote, the Sitwells with their propaganda for "modern art" (not forgetting, of course, Mr Sacheverell Sitwell's works on Baroque art), Mrs Virginia Woolf, who, in *To the Lighthouse*, has described so brilliantly the mental processes of a painter, Mr Wyndham Lewis, Mr Herbert Read, and a great many others. This is matter for a gossip paragraph, but it may turn out to have some importance.

I think it may turn out that the problems that have risen out of the ceaseless arguments in the studios resemble in

## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE IN PAINT

some respects the problems which other writers in this volume have noticed in their accounts of the modern poets. If comparison and contrast help us towards a clearer statement of these related problems, it will be something.

MONTAGU SLATER.



Thirteen

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

# Thirteen

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

*by*

## CONSTANT LAMBERT

THE present troubled period in music has often been compared to the somewhat similar experimental period at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Although at first sight there might seem a great similarity between the two, there are certain strongly marked traits in the contemporary movement which are not shared by the earlier period.

In the seventeenth century the many curious experiments of the time were not made for experiment's sake merely, but with a view to increasing the expressive power of music, and pastiche was relatively unknown. Technical experiment for its own sake and self-conscious pastiche are unfortunately the dominant characteristics of present-day music.

This, combined with the fact that no composer of to-day



## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

seems capable of producing work of any interest or value when over the age of forty, gives one little hope that the present period will be considered by future historians as anything but a purely transitional phase of technical rather than intrinsic interest. But, just as an indecisive battle is often of greater tactical interest than a mere rout, so the present period is a fascinating study from many points of view, not necessarily musical, and it is well worth while to examine the causes of the weakness, indecision, and deliberate eccentricity of contemporary music, all of them signs that the present-day composer is entirely lacking in the personal confidence and general background of the nineteenth-century composer.

Though any sweeping generalisation is bound to be inaccurate, it may safely be said that the spirit of any age is far more genuinely expressed in certain arts than in the others, and that the most typical art of any age is often taken as the universal criterion of criticism, a sort of procrustean couch in which the others are made uncomfortable and unwilling bed-companions.

Although the romantic movement of the nineteenth century is generally thought of as a literary movement, there is little doubt that it found its most typical and successful expression in music: one has only to think of such works as the *Symphonie Fantastique* to realise how much more living they are than, for instance, the poetry of Byron or Victor

## SCRUTINIES II

Hugo. Mr Cecil Gray, in his admirable *Survey of Contemporary Music*, has rightly pointed out that the reason so much of the literary art of the nineteenth century is unconvincing and forced is that it was trying to express emotions and ideas that were really the domain of music. With the music of that period, whether we are sympathetically inclined to it or not, we are bound to admit its extreme facility and finish, its convincing expression and genuine use of the medium. But with a few notable exceptions this impression of ease, confidence, and unself-consciousness is entirely lacking in contemporary music. To take a Freudian parallel: the music of the nineteenth century was heterosexual, and free from repressions and inhibitions, while the music of to-day, either unable or unwilling to find a normal outlet, provides an interesting gallery of Kraft-Ebbing abnormalities, ranging from the necrophily of a Schoenberg to the infantile fixations of a Sauguet. The chief cause of this is that the most dominant characteristics of modern thought and modern life are essentially divorced from the main trend of music, although they have found superb expression in the plastic arts and the more objective forms of literature. These arts have not been so vitally affected by the gradual mechanisation of life, and the present reaction against romanticism and insistence on objectivity has been all to their advantage. For this reason the most successful and typical work of our time is to be found, not in music

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

or lyric poetry, but in such things as a Picasso still-life or the critical and satirical writings of Wyndham Lewis. The spirit that informs these works, though, is essentially unmusical (except, of course, in the sense that any organisation of forms can be called musical), and when we get a similar type of mentality producing music, the result is sterile and unnatural to the last degree. Parallel æsthetics, the favourite parlour-game of such critics as Clive Bell, for example, has led to pieces of music being condemned for the possession of qualities which, however detrimental to a painting, are only natural and desirable in any piece of music. To condemn a composition for being romantic or emotional is about as intelligent as condemning a painting for making use of perspective or "light and shade."

Artists of to-day are, for the most part, extremely self-conscious, and are far more influenced by criticism than in previous periods. Musicians, being notoriously the least broad-minded and generally intelligent of artists, have had most of their criticism and theorising done for them by men who, however brilliant as writers, have been totally incapable of a real understanding of music. As a result, musicians, particularly in Paris, are as meekly following the lead of the art critics as the nineteenth-century painters followed the ideals of the literary critics. (Jean Cocteau on music will probably read as grotesquely in a few years' time as Ruskin on painting.)

## SCRUTINIES II

The gradual subjugation of contemporary music to the ideals of painting can be traced in the productions of Serge Diaghileff,<sup>1</sup> who, in spite of his great importance as a remarkable impresario, is in many ways a man of straw who shows which way the wind blows. In his later productions, we find the music gradually playing a less and less important rôle, and finally becoming quite subservient to the decorative scheme—a mere restaurant-band accompaniment to the visual banquet. This is quite understandable, for in deserting the true tradition of music, in an attempt to follow some such brilliant *ignis fatuus* as Cocteau, and to imbue his music with the much-admired qualities of irony and objectivity, the composer immediately places himself at a disadvantage with the plastic artists who are pursuing the true functions of their own arts. It is for this reason that contemporary painting offers so much more satisfaction than contemporary music.

By contemporary music I am referring strictly to what has been done since the war, and not to the music of the early twentieth century. Music, until very recently, lagged behind the thought of its period, and the music of the early twentieth century, on which, it need hardly be said, the whole

<sup>1</sup> Since this essay was written, the civilised world has suffered a great loss through the death of N. Serge Diaghileff, one of the most remarkable figures of our times. It is to be hoped that the references to him will be looked on as in no way a personal reflection, but rather as a criticism of the intellectual and artistic movements that he was forced, through the nature of his calling, to represent.

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

prestige of modern music rests, is in reality of the nineties of music, an exquisite late florescence rather than a new growth. In spite of their superficial air of extreme modernity, such works as *Le Sacré du Printemps* and *Pierrot Lunaire* are merely the death-struggles of Impressionism and the German *Lied*. Like the music of Debussy, undoubtedly the greatest master of this period, the appeal of these works is primarily to the musical nerves rather than to the musical intelligence, and it is their emphasis or colour rather than design that allies them to musical impressionism.

*Le Sacré du Printemps* is usually held up as a virile reaction against the so-called effeminate and invertebrate style of Debussy; but with the exception of those passages which are in the direct Glinka-Borodin tradition, and to which one can find an exact parallel so early as 1840 (*Ruslan and Ludmilla*), much of this work is merely a barbaric and more dynamic version of certain aspects of Debussy's genius. It has, it is true, had a great influence on modern technique, but it is *au fond* no more than an extremely effective theatrical work. Each succeeding concert performance only serves to emphasise the essential thinness and lack of continuity of the musical thought, and in a few years' time it is doubtful if it will have the purely sensuous appeal of, say, the *Prince Igor* dances, any more than the *Ride of the Valkyries*, once the last word in physical excitement, has now as much as the Finale of the Eighth Symphony, for example. But although

## SCRUTINIES II

*Le Sacré du Printemps* is not the epoch-making innovation it was once thought to be, and cannot for skill and imagination be compared for a moment with the later orchestral works of Debussy, it is nevertheless a work of genuine vitality and sincerity which marks a distinct advance in the expressive power of music. When we compare the early ballets of Stravinsky with what he has written since the war, we realise at once the extraordinary difference between present-day music and that of any earlier period. I am not referring to *Les Noces*, Stravinsky's most valuable contribution to music and the one that shows most originality, but to the elaborate series of pastiches with which his name is now chiefly associated. Pastiche, of course, existed in the nineteenth century, but only in the form of slight *pièces d'occasion* or necessary scene-painting in theatrical works: it never usurped the place of genuine inspiration. Tschai-kovsky provides a pleasant example of Mozartian pastiche in *The Queen of Spades*, but in spite of his great admiration for Mozart, nothing would have induced him in a serious work to steal the thunder of a classical composer, and in spite of their occasional vulgarity and sentimentality, his works command admiration for their passionate sincerity and the genuinely personal quality of their emotion. Nothing would be more likely to disgust him than *Le Baiser de la Fée*, the work of Stravinsky which is "inspired by the muse of Tschai-kovsky." The deliberate cultivation of pastiche on

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Stravinsky's part is probably due to two things: his lack of melodic invention and his curious belief in reaction for its own sake. Of his essential melodic poverty there can be no question. It can be traced through all his works, from the pale Wagnerian reflections of *Feux d'artifice* and *Les Abeilles* (*scherzo fantastique*), to the fragments of every Russian composer from Rimsky-Korsakov to Rebikov which fill his ballets, and finally to the dry reminiscences of the eighteenth-century masters which constitute his present stock-in-trade. Everywhere we find the same incapacity for self-expression by outline and its resultant over-emphasis on colour, rhythmic eccentricity, arabesque, general bric-à-brac, and all that is necessary to conceal this disability. It is a disability which he shares with many other composers, for it is a depressing feature of present-day music that it seems unable to achieve lyricism save through the medium of pastiche. Nowhere is there a figure like Bellini, who created a whole new world of emotion through melody alone.

Stravinsky's innovations have affected the surface and colour of music only, and have had little influence on its line and construction. The lack of purely formal interest in his music is astonishing, and in one work only, *Les Noces*, do we find any real formal invention. This work, in which his rhythmic virtuosity finds its most sincere and powerful expression, is certainly his most moving composition, and

## SCRUTINIES II

it is interesting to note that it is the last work of his to be national in feeling. Russian composers have never made good Europeans, and Paris in particular seems to have a fatal effect on them. They become like the Spanish innkeeper we read of in George Borrow, who, having married and settled down in a distant province, forgot his own dialect without ever successfully mastering the new one. But although *Les Noces* gave one the highest hopes, each succeeding work has only lowered them. Stravinsky has now become a sort of musical Dr Voronoff, grafting the glands of various apes on to the withered body of his own inspiration. Occasionally he emulates Dr Moreau, and in *Le Baiser de la Fée* he has performed a painful piece of vivisection on some innocent little piano pieces by Tchaikovsky; but alas, the result has had the same disproportion and curious repulsiveness as the Doctor's wilful experiments with living forms.

Although they are generally described as neo-classical, there is a curious similarity between the technique of these works (and those of Stravinsky's many imitators) and the work of the *sur-réaliste* painters. There might not at first sight seem any connection between anything so self-conscious as *Apollo Musagetes* and a school of painting which claims to be based on the subconscious mind, but there is one strong quality which is common to both—intellectual incongruity.

In the work of Yves Tanguy, for example, an unimaginatively painted figure in a toga will have a flat fish or a railway



## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

signal for a head. Neither the figure nor the head have any interest as painting, and it is only the incongruity that strikes the attention. Stravinsky's illogical use of classical formulas is much the same as this use of realistic objects. Thus a sequential passage from an eighteenth-century work whose *raison d'être* was to lead to a full close or climax will be made either to turn round and bite its own tail, or else to lead to some pointless and stylistically false piece of modernism, in much the way that Tanguy will place a railway truck inside a bowl of goldfish.

This grotesque fantasia on hackneyed formulas has its parallel, of course, in literature, and is one of the most depressing features of modern art in general. Everywhere we find a technical juggling and rearrangement, or a humourless parody of old material, rather than anything really creative. Joyce is the most brilliant exponent of these objective fantasias in literature, which is the art most suited to this technical treatment; but he has carried them through with infinitely more style and conviction than does Stravinsky. One might take as a type of a certain style in modern music Joyce's sentence: "First there came boke and nigh him wigworms and nigh him pickpocket with picket pocket pomb, picket pocket point, pickpocket prod, pickpocket promise and upwithem"—and as opposed to this one might take as a type of academic music the plain and serviceable statement, "Please beware of pickpockets"; but works like the

## SCRUTINIES II

Stravinsky Piano Concerto are neither one thing nor the other, and are like a notice which would tell one to "Please beware of picket pocket pomb, picket pocket point, pick-pocket prod, pickpocket promise, etc." That so much modern art should be derived purely from art is a sign of intellectual and emotional bankruptcy. Instead of the creation of fresh material, we are given a *voulu* rearrangement of the genuine article. Plays about plays, ballets about ballets, films about films, are all signs of the same devitalised mentality, and with the work of Stravinsky and his more light-hearted followers we get what is to all intents and purposes music about music.

This purely detached view of musical material as an inanimate object, and not as an emotive and significant succession of sounds, goes hand-in-hand with the sterile philosophy of reaction for its own sake. Stravinsky has even remarked "Toute réaction est vrai," thus giving one an interesting clue to the mental processes which lie behind the *volte-faces* which his propagandists vainly try to explain as a continuous and steady progress. The natural result of this petty cycle of negative reactions is, of course, a return to one's starting-point, and it is amusing to see that French music, in the person of Sauguet (an insignificant but popular and typical Parisian composer), has already returned to the bad Massenet which is its natural state. The delighted audience is able at the same time to indulge its simple bad

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

taste and to flatter itself that it is understanding and applauding the *dernier cri*.

No one is so foolish as to expect modern music to be completely uninfluenced by earlier periods, but there is a great deal of difference between finding stimulus in classical music and "period fancying."

This "period-fancying" mentality is usually combined with a complete inability to dissociate the essential form and feeling of a work from its purely external characteristics. For instance, it is amusing to notice how, in the world of painting, the thoroughly legitimate insistence on plastic values as opposed to literary associations has led many people to acclaim as a formal masterpiece any picture or statue that is totally devoid of intellectual significance. Similarly, in the world of music, any work that reproduces in however garbled a form the more superficial characteristics of the eighteenth-century masters is considered a more classical and constructed piece of music than any outwardly romantic and literary work, even though the latter may possess formal qualities of the very highest order.

The fundamental cause of the "period fancying" which is so deplorable a feature of most contemporary art is a complete lack of genuine spontaneity and personal emotion. Music has ceased to be an emotional or even intellectual expression and has become a matter of good taste merely—a sort of house-furnishing in which one picks one's harmonic

## SCRUTINIES II

style, for instance, as though one were choosing curtains for the bathroom; and just as chintz has given way to American cloth, which will in turn probably give way to a really witty revival of Nottingham lace, so the musical fashions succeed each other with the monotony of so many numbers of "Vogue."

This cynically fashionable and snobbish point of view no doubt originated with critics such as Jean Cocteau, that astounding medley of genius, tipster, mid-wife, and liaison officer; but unfortunately it has spread to those creative musicians who should above all be free from such a taint. Nothing is more pathetic than the spectacle of the modern artist torn from his proper surroundings, to dash from drawing-room to drawing-room, from clique to clique, in a frenzied attempt to surprise or even keep up with his public, reacting and reacting continually. This half-social, half-political attitude towards art has produced an intellectual forcing-bed that gives the unfortunate artist no chance of natural development, and small wonder that at the time he should be settling down to his best work he is exhausted both mentally and physically, a leader in name only, for ever at the beck and call of his often more astute followers, a weather-cock masquerading as a sign-post.

This state of affairs is prevalent chiefly in Paris, and it may seem that I am giving disproportionate attention to one particular school. It is true that little music of any value

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

has been written in Paris for some time, and that many important composers stand completely outside the fashionable circus of which Diaghileff and Cocteau are the ringmasters, with Stravinsky as their principal exponent of *la haute école* and a whole rag tag and bob-tail of jugglers, calculating horses, Spanish dancers, female impersonators, and powdered clowns too numerous to mention.

But in Paris the artists are more aware of each other, more closely linked than anywhere else, and so we get there a clearer view of the contemporary composer in his relation to contemporary art, thought, and society. The composer quite frankly does not seem to come too well out of the contest.

It is doubtful, though, if the situation is much better in countries with a more specialised and purely musical tradition. The German-speaking races suffer from the immense disadvantage of a too continuous, established, and over-ripe tradition. There has been a soul-killing facility about their work for many years, and their musical thought either slips too easily into the ready grooves of academic sentiment or else, in their anxiety to avoid this, their work takes on a deliberate and equally mechanical eccentricity and becomes a nightmare parody of their own conventions. This is seen most clearly in the case of Schoenberg. His first works are typical examples of the effete Brahmsian tradition, while his later works, such as the operas, show an almost maniacal

## SCRUTINIES II

avoidance of any melodic phrase, harmonic or orchestral effect which is in any way related to ordinary practice. In between these two extremes Schoenberg has written a few exquisite works, such as the Second Quartet (with voice) and *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*; but since then he has become the victim of his own mannerisms and those of his followers, who like female spiders are now devouring the source of their own fertility. The Schoenberg method without his genius produces an inverted pedantry as hide-bound and inflexible as the most rigid, conventional academicism, and Schoenberg's later works have been entirely lacking in the fierce imagination and morbid sensibility which make *Pierrot Lunaire* one of the few masterpieces of our age.

Although there is nothing in Germany quite so sterile and *voulu* as the Viennese atonal school, we find that the Germans also suffer from the same uninspired facility and tendency to overwrite. Hindemith, the most typical and important German composer of to-day, is undoubtedly a man of immense talent and probably the most brilliant journalist in music that has been known. His output is phenomenal, but nowhere do we find a work whose content is proportionate to the executive skill displayed. Like many of his countrymen, he has almost too great a command over his medium. One does not want to suggest that music should be a mere automatic writing with a composer as a half-sentient ouija-

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

board, but there is no doubt that the greatest works of art have imposed their form on their creator as much as the creator himself has directed it. It is the absence of this organic life and intrinsic form that we feel in Hindemith's by now almost weekly works.

It is only the very minor Princes of Darkness that are continually at the beck and call of a book of spells, and the ability to produce spirits from the vasty deep at any hour of the day or night may, of course, betoken one is a great magician, or it may mean that one has command over Poltergeists merely. To the many precise definitions that Teutonic criticism affords, such as *Master of the Pianissimo* (Von Webern) or *Uncle of the Fifths* (Puccini), one might add the new one, "Poltergeist-Meister." Hindemith is the most brilliant member of that large class of German composers whose undoubted skill would have found expression in any walk of life, and not necessarily in the domain of music, to conquer which requires more than mere dexterity.

There is infinitely more genuine and profound musical feeling in the work of Béla Bartók, who, far from indulging in the fabrication of music for its own sake or cultivating a cold objectivity, is almost too subjective and personal in style. With him architecture and the purely decorative side of music are entirely subordinated to a stark and uncompromising record of personal experience; so much so that

## SCRUTINIES II

his material seems at times insufficiently digested and has the intimacy but also the incoherence of an emotional diary. In spite of its many fine and dignified qualities, his work often suffers from a too great insistence on purely national characteristics. This insistence is not a feature of Hungarian music only. In far too many countries we find the same irritating musical chauvinism, the same emphasis on purely local colour and atmosphere, born of an inability to realise the limitations of folk-song.

At first the cultivation of folk-song had the excellent result of enlarging the vocabulary of music and freeing it from the rather ponderous weight of the purely Teutonic tradition, much as the recognition of non-European and what at one time was considered "savage art" has enlarged the vocabulary of the modern plastic artist, and freed him from the academic yoke of a faded Græco-Italian tradition. But the "arty" and self-conscious creation of a folk-song style and the abuse of folk-song material has a stultifying and cramping effect on the musical development of any country. A good folk-song is already a finished work of art and of no more use as a symphonic subject, for example, than a ball would be for a spoke of a wheel. Much of Bartók's work is marred by his continual use of folk-song fragments which utterly fail to blend with his extremely personal and far-fetched harmonic style. Apart from their somewhat exaggerated nationalism, his later works, which



## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

have by no means the breadth or emotional power of his earlier compositions, are marked by an almost sadistic emphasis on the non-melodic and purely percussive elements of his art. At one time the most original composer in Europe, Bartók has of late been strangely influenced by certain works of Stravinsky, in particular *Les Noces*.

The one composer who has remained completely himself and who has been unswayed by any petty pseudo-political art movement is Sibelius, in many ways the greatest figure in contemporary music. He is one of the few moderns whose innovations have affected the structure rather than the façade of music. Although the most subtle orchestrator of our times and a great stylist in every sense of the word, it is the originality of thought and profundity of content that are the most impressive features of his work. Like other great composers before him, he has written many cheap, superficial, and insignificant works, but a composer should be judged by his highest achievements only, which in Sibelius's case are the magnificent series of Symphonies and one or two of the Symphonic Poems. There is no doubt that Sibelius has advanced the symphonic form more than any composer since Beethoven. Unhampered by the oppressive tradition which has eventually driven the Germans from a sentimental diatonicism to its mechanical reaction of intellectual atonality, he has produced a series of works which would, one imagines, be far more acceptable to

## SCRUTINIES II

Beethoven himself than the elaborate scaffoldings that the Germans have erected in his name.

At a time when the modern composers from whom one expected most seem to be relapsing into a premature senility, Sibelius is one of the few inspiring figures in contemporary music. He occupies a proud and solitary position as far from the Conservatoire composers as he is from the false futurists and revolutionary pasticheurs. He has shown us that true originality is concerned with thought, not vocabulary, and that it is possible to create something entirely new with the old materials. Although his best works (which are at present disgracefully neglected) may not become widely known in his own lifetime, they are almost certain to have a profound influence on future generations.

In a brief survey such as this it is inevitable that schools and movements, more than individual composers, should be considered, with the result that certain interesting figures are necessarily passed over. But in this age of youth-movements and *avants-gardes* the number of really individual and personal composers is naturally small, and there are not many young composers who are as independent and detached as Sibelius. Prokofieff is perhaps the most important of these, and though there are certain superficial and fashionable traits in his music, he is one of the very few modern composers whose melodic line is genuinely expressive without being either conventional or over-strained. Unfortunately

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

attention has wrongly been centred on the purely objective and ironical side of his music, and to most people his name recalls exhibitions of dazzling but empty virtuosity rather than the many lyrical and almost pastoral pieces which are his most valuable contribution to music. Like Hindemith, whom in many respects he resembles, he is to a certain extent the victim of his own skill, and his talent for what is technically known as "mucking about" is so phenomenal that it must be a very great temptation to abuse it and to produce a series of brilliant but essentially superficial works such as *Le Pas d'Acier*. Fortunately, in his best compositions, such as the Third Piano Concerto, without in any way sacrificing his wit and skill, he has given expression to a very genuine and deeply felt musical impulse, and the variations of this Concerto must be accounted among the very finest examples of modern music.

As all the writers, many of them of great importance, reviewed in this book are English, it may well be asked why I have had no occasion to mention an English composer in this survey. Unfortunately, although the state of music in England is immeasurably better than it has been for over a hundred years, and although there are many amiable practitioners of the art of composition in this country, there is practically no figure who can without prejudice be considered of international importance.

With a certain quiet and irritating complacency, English

## SCRUTINIES II

composers have contentedly paddled about in a nationalist backwater snaring minnows in the shape of folk-songs, which are then served up either with the traditional wateriness of English cooking or, in the case of the more daring anglers, smothered with a sauce *à la française*.

One would have thought that English composers might at least have been warned by the ultimate failure of the nationalist movement in other countries. It is true, of course, that in Russia the nationalist movement produced works of the greatest merit, and that there have been hardly any good Russian composers outside that movement; but then Russia hardly provides a parallel to England. To start with, the folk-songs and dances are there a really living tradition, and do not have to be extracted from reluctant octogenarians in the remoter parts of the country; more important still, though, is the fact that Russian nationalism is as much the creation of one genius as any school has been. I refer, of course, to Glinka, a composer who is still grossly underestimated, and whose best works are so little known that Mr W. J. Turner was once able to refer to Rimsky-Korsakov as the most original composer he knew—a statement that would be unthinkable from anyone familiar with the score of *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. Under the direct influence of Glinka the Russians produced many remarkably fine works, but with the death of Borodin the tradition became, to all intents and purposes, completely moribund. The advent of the

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Diaghileff ballet gave a slight fillip to the nationalist style and produced the early works of Stravinsky (which are, of course, directly influenced by Glinka); but apart from these and one or two works by Prokofieff, the Russian school is as dead as can be, for now that the superficial attractions of local colour and national atmosphere have been exhausted there does not remain sufficient material to hold our interest.

The national movement in Spain (which provides a closer parallel to England) is perhaps the most striking example of the futility of such ideals. With the exception of one or two fascinating pieces by Albeniz, what has this school produced, save a few formless reminiscences of street songs and dances, charming enough to those for whom they have a sentimental attraction, but utterly lacking in invention, construction, or any quality of permanent value? The exploitation of local Parisian and boulevardier characteristics by Les Six and the École d'Arceuil has produced even fewer works of interest, and there is no need to go through the whole dismal catalogue of nationalist schools from Eastern Europe to England to realise that, until some more universal criterion is found, it is hopeless to expect any other but superficial work. Gloomy as the prospect may seem, the much prophesied adoption of jazz by all countries would at least provide what has been lacking since the eighteenth century—an international style. In the eighteenth century composers did not excuse the failure of their works abroad with

## SCRUTINIES II

the statement that one couldn't be expected to appreciate such works unless one had been brought up in Paris or London, as the case might be.

One should remember that the greatest English composers, such as Byrd, Purcell, or Boyce, did not scorn to reap what benefit they could from their foreign contemporaries, and yet they remained national in the best sense of the word. Even in our time, Elgar, whose music is indubitably British (though to my mind it emphasises the less desirable traits in our character), has not found it necessary to proclaim his nationality by the introduction of clumsily harmonised Celtic folk-tunes and pseudo-archaisms supposed (quite falsely) to be "Elizabethan in feeling." Perhaps, when our composers are more interested in being good musicians rather than national musicians, they may produce works that will not only be better but more truly English.

The one English composer who stands well away from this movement, and who, at the same time, is perhaps the most promising writer of his generation in Europe, is William Walton. Although his compositions are few in number, they are distinguished by their sincerity and their great technical skill (which never degenerates into mere virtuosity). It is true that in one or two of his works, such as the quite unimportant orchestral suite based on *Façade*, Walton has been strongly influenced by the Parisian school, and indeed a certain malleability and lack of self-confidence is perhaps

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

this composer's greatest fault. But in his two Concertos, especially the Second, for Viola and Orchestra, Walton has avoided the pitfalls both of fashion and self-conscious nationalism and has produced works which are not only in the true tradition of English music, but of international interest. These, together with the best works of Prokofieff, with whom Walton has a certain affinity, are among the most encouraging products of contemporary music. Thoroughly clear-cut in form and style, in no way over-sentimental, they yet do not disdain the romantic qualities and the melodic appeal which are part of all great music and always will be. What one demands of the modern composer is neither a revolution nor a pastiche, but an intelligent and enlightened use of tradition, free from either a shapeless emotionalism or a cold and sterile objectivity, free above all from any pseudo-political, pseudo-social considerations of fashion, reaction, the contemporary movement, and the *avant-garde*. We are as likely to get this from England as from any country with a longer tradition, and if Walton continues the steady progress he has made in the last few years, he may eventually succeed in putting England on the map again from the point of view of the creative musician.

As I have pointed out, the present period is a hard one for the composer. His way through the world of fashionable art and thought resembles that of the hardy traveller who attempted to cross the sinister Desert of Lop, "the abode of

## SCRUTINIES II

many evil spirits which amused travellers to their destruction with most extraordinary illusions." Like these unfortunate voyagers, the composers "unexpectedly hear themselves called to by their names and in a tone of voice to which they are accustomed; supposing the call to proceed from their companions, they are led away by it from the direct road, and, not knowing in what direction to advance, are left to perish." Not only do these spirits "assume the appearance of their travelling companions, who address them by name and endeavour to conduct them out of the proper road," but "they are said at times to fill the air with the sounds of all kinds of musical instruments and also of drums and the clash of arms, obliging the travellers to close their line of march and to proceed in more compact order. Such are the excessive troubles and dangers that must unavoidably be encountered in the passage of this desert"; and certainly this age has not been prodigal of Marco Polos. Fortunately the very violence of a desert whirlwind precludes its long duration, and one has every hope that the next phase in contemporary music will be one, not of fashionable revolution and charlatanry, but of sincere and solid achievement.

CONSTANT LAMBERT.